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PAUL'S SISTER

VOL. III.

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.

PAUL'S SISTER

BY

FRANCES MARY PEARD

AUTHOR OF 'NEAR NEIGHBOURS' AND 'THE COUNTRY COUSIN'

'No existence can be made perfect except through restraint
and sacrifice'

J. H. SHORTHOUSE

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



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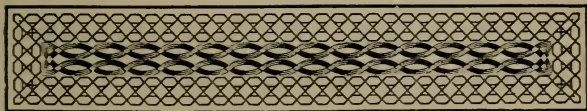
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PAUL'S SISTER.



CHAPTER XXII.

A good companion, and as firm a friend.—POPE.



LUCY'S absence had been taken advantage of by Norma's sister, Bessie Charlton, now Lady Drummond, to come and stay with Norma. She was a young woman of frankly-expressed opinions, and, disliking Lucy, she found it so hard to be what she called pleasant, that, as far as possible, she avoided staying in the same house. The difference between her and her sister was curiously marked. Bessie was small,

and rather thickly set, with a good-humoured decided face, from which prosperity broadly smiled. She was thoroughly practical, and troubled by no inconvenient impulses or enthusiasms; she held Norma to be weak, and pitied while she loved her. All her ideas about Lucy, for instance, she considered far-fetched and absurd—as she said to her husband,

‘Some women must make martyrs of themselves, and that is just what poor Norma will always do. She is quite independent, and might be extremely happy; it really is provoking that she should consider it her duty to be saddled with a sister-in-law. But what can one do?’

Clearly nothing; so Bessie contented herself with letting Norma know what she thought of it, and with choosing for her own visits the time when Lucy was away. The sisters enjoyed such times, for in spite of the marked differences between them, they were very fond

of each other, and, as Norma was young for her age, and Bessie old, the gap of years was not much felt. They were sitting together one stormy evening, and talking of many things, though a listener might have remarked that the many things chiefly related to Lady Drummond.

‘Yes,’ said the young mother, looking critically at her sister, ‘I am almost certain that Madge will be like you. She has the same eyes, the same mouth—perhaps her nose isn’t quite so well-shaped, but—I don’t know. It doesn’t do to pronounce too definitely upon a nose. I feel sure it will be very nice. And I am very glad, Norma, that she should be like you.’

‘Thank you, dear,’ said Norma humbly.

‘Whenever,’ Bessie went on—‘whenever I see you, I am a little astonished to see how very beautiful you are still. You don’t change in the least. Robert says you’re wasted down

here, and ought to be in London, but — I don't know. Do tell me. Have you really resolved never to marry again?'

Mrs. Winyeatt reddened like a young girl.

'One need hardly resolve on that subject — I don't think one should.'

'Oh, nor do I. But you have always spoken as if you might make one of those rash resolutions; and, you know, Norma, you are dreadfully given to acting upon impulse.'

'Not now, I think,' Norma said uneasily.

'I wouldn't trust you. If you thought it a fine thing to do, you'd go and immolate yourself, before any of us had time to stop you. I heartily wish that we lived within easier reach of each other.' Lady Drummond, who was busily engaged in knitting a hunting waistcoat for her husband, looked up as she spoke, and saw to her surprise that Norma's sweet eyes were shining with tears.

'Oh, Bessie, so do I!' she exclaimed grate-

fully. 'You don't know how often I wish it, or how cut off I feel!'

'Then, my dear child, why don't you come? Craigmuir isn't at all a bad place; I mean to get a governess for Madge, and she and Agnes could join. Best off all, we should look after you — thoroughly. Come, think of it.'

'What would Lucy do?' asked Norma, faintly smiling.

'There, didn't I say you loved to immolate yourself? Lucy, if I had the ordering of your life, should go and make trial of the houses of some other relations. I dare say she wouldn't care for them much, because you've spoilt her; but it would be a wholesome experience. Why doesn't she marry? I'm always hoping to hear she has found a husband.'

'She is only four-and-twenty,' pleaded her sister.

'I know. And at four-and-twenty you

were married, and so was I. The only possible good that I can see in your having Lucy here is that she insists upon your going out, and I dare say that if it were not for her, no one would ever see you.'

Mrs. Winyeatt made no answer, and the conversation soon drifted back to Bessie's life at Craigmuir, and the bags which Sir Robert had made that autumn. Lady Drummond was absolutely content with her lot, with a kind sensible husband, with her girls and baby boy, and with the universe in general; so content that she was inclined to think that others who were less pleased with the aspect of things, had only themselves to thank for the deficiency. Norma used to wonder sometimes whether it were so; whether all the tumult and vague questioning of her heart, were no more than the outgrowth of foolish discontent. Until Lawrence came she had thought it had been safely stilled to rest,

and she was half pained, half ashamed, to find it as strong and as vehement as ever.

Bessie left her the morning after this little conversation, going back to her Robert and her children without a doubt or misgiving; she had perfect confidence in herself, in her judgment and her position. Norma found herself smiling as she walked back from the station, and yet half sighing for envy of this unattainable repose.

She was out all the afternoon, only coming in at tea-time, when she found not only Miss Ellison but Isabel and Janet Somerville, and by-and-by some half a dozen others dropped in, Mrs. Carrington among them.

‘I wish I had seen Lady Drummond,’ this last was saying. ‘You have so few relations, Norma, that one has no opportunity of discovering little reflections of yourself. I should like to have known her.’

‘You would have seen no reflection of

Norma. I never saw two sisters with less likeness,' said Miss Ellison.

'Bessie,' said Mrs. Winyeatt with a smile, 'puts me to shame. She is years younger, and yet she is so practical and capable that she manages her great house with all the ease in the world.'

'So could you, my dear, if you turned your thoughts to it.'

She laughed and shook her head.

'Ah, but that's the point! I never can turn my thoughts to it. What makes me so ashamed of myself is that I make a mighty struggle to force my attention, and then some little wandering idea comes idling by, and off I go in pursuit. No one knows what I would give for a well-regulated mind.'

'Don't believe her,' said Miss Ellison with a little vexation. 'Her books are models of neatness.'

'At any rate, I wouldn't change her,' said

Mrs. Carrington, nodding kindly ; and something, she did not know what, but some connection of ideas made her add, 'By the way, and apropos of nothing, will anyone tell me what has become of Mr. Lawrence? He vanished like a meteor, and I don't like my friends to choose that form of progression. He was much too satisfactory a person to be parted with all of a sudden, and without a word to break it to one.'

'He is well, I believe,' Norma answered quietly ; 'Lucy, you know, is staying with his people in Devonshire.'

'Lucy!' said Mrs. Carrington, lifting her eyebrows. Norma went on—

'There has been a very sad death—from an accident—in the family. I am afraid poor Lucy has felt it a great deal. I see there is a letter from her come by the second post ; and very likely she will fix some time for returning.'

‘What ages she has been away!’ exclaimed Isabel Somerville, who overheard these last words.

‘I should not have suspected Lucy of caring for more than a few days of country life,’ said Mrs. Carrington.

‘She has not liked to leave while they were in such trouble,’ explained Norma; and then the talk drifted away into other channels. But, before she left, Mrs. Carrington, finding herself close to Miss Ellison, remarked—

‘How well Norma looks! I have not seen her so bright for a long while. Is it Lady Drummond’s coming, or—between ourselves—Lucy’s going, which has had such a good effect?’

As was often the case, Miss Ellison stayed behind, for Norma was always glad if she could induce her to remain for the evening. She had brought her work and established herself in the drawing-room, but Mrs. Win-

yeatt, after standing for a few minutes at the window, watching some beautiful effects of white smoke against a background of soft grey sky, took her letters and went to her own room. Why she did so she could not have explained, but something in Lucy's handwriting had the effect of putting her on the defensive. She felt as if she must be prepared, hold herself in—that, in fact, it was better for her to be alone, without having any definite reason ready for the impression.

Lucy's letter was not very long, but Norma was so long a time reading it that the dusk, which when she went upstairs was only just beginning to creep in, deepened until she could not have seen to read a word, although she still stood holding it in her hand. The housemaid came up to draw down the blinds, but seeing her mistress standing in the middle of the room, shut the door softly and went away again. A sound of scales

arose from the schoolroom, and always, before this hour, the mother was in the habit of going to see how Agnes was getting on, and to give her a kiss. It was evident that Lucy's letter, whatever it contained, was sufficiently absorbing to have pushed all other matters for the time out of her sister-in-law's mind. When she at last stirred, she did not notice the darkness. She laid the letter on the table, and covered her face with her hands. 'Oh, poor, poor Lucy!' she said under her breath.

Presently she moved a step or two, found the matches and struck a light, after which she read the letter again and very carefully. The light falling on her face showed that it was exceedingly pale. She began, however, to move about, and remembering Agnes, hurried down to the schoolroom, where the daily governess was putting on her hat. The little girl jumped off the music-stool and ran to her mother.

‘What have you been doing all this time,’ she cried, ‘upstairs in your room? I was listening and listening. Now I’ve finished, haven’t I, Miss Fox? so I can go into the drawing-room. Is Miss Ellison there?’

When mother and child went there together, Miss Ellison looked up with some laughing remark upon her long desertion. But she was immediately struck by the change in Norma’s face. ‘Something has happened,’ she concluded rapidly, ‘and she must have heard it through her letters. Was it Lucy’s? Has she succeeded at last?’

The child’s presence, however, prevented her attempting to find out what it was, and it appeared as if Norma treated Agnes as a shield from inconvenient questions, for she allowed her to stay up until it was time to dress for the tea-dinner, or whatever a somewhat nondescript meal may be called. When she had got back to her own room, she drew out

the letter and read it again, weighing each word. As she read, her face showed no lightening of its gravity.

When dinner was over and they were again in the drawing-room and alone, Miss Ellison cudgelled her brains for an effective supply of indifferent subjects. If the truth is to be told, she was dying to find out the cause of the disturbance; but she would not force Norma's confidence, and until she spoke, would not so much as signify that she observed anything. After a little while, indeed, finding that her friend was disposed for silence, she took up a book.

It was getting late before Norma looked at the clock.

‘So late?’ she said with a somewhat wan smile. ‘How badly I am treating you!’

‘You have had something to think about, that is all, and I don't think either of us finds it necessary to stand on ceremony with each

other.' Miss Ellison laid down her book and spoke cheerfully.

'No,' said Norma softly; 'that is why being with you is always a rest.' She paused for a moment.

'If I can rest you in any way I shall be glad,' said Miss Ellison. 'You look tired and ill now.'

'I am not ill,' Norma said, 'but I am tired—tired and puzzled. I don't know how it is, Mary, but lately I have found it very hard to be certain what is right, to judge between right and wrong, which ought to be such a simple matter.'

'I don't know,' returned Miss Ellison musingly; 'I am afraid to a good many of us complications present themselves with great readiness. As for other people, I am never quite sure whether the good I try to do them is right or a dreadful wrong—almost a crime, in fact. Mr. Saunders hurls political economy

at my head over those miserable Tompkins', for instance. Mrs. Tompkins was a fool for marrying her husband, no doubt, and I should say she had been convinced of it ever since ; but she is an excellent woman, and the children are very nice children, and I really can't see them starve, however much the moralities of the state demand it. No, depend upon it we must put up with a certain complication in our straight lines here.' Norma was silent, and Miss Ellison looked at her. Then she said rather bluntly—' Something is troubling you, Norma. If I can help you, tell me ; if not, just talk without telling.'

Norma smiled.

' Yes,' she said, ' something is troubling me very seriously, and I don't know how to act for the best.'

Miss Ellison was magnanimous, but human.

' I suppose it is Lucy ?' she suggested.

' Yes—Lucy. You know so much that I

would tell you more, but that I can't depend on your judgment in the matter, for the simple reason that you are so prejudiced against poor Lucy.'

'Very well,' said Miss Ellison in an affronted tone. Norma looked at her, and then drew her chair close to the other woman's, and laid her hand on hers entreatingly.

'Don't be cross,' she said; 'I know it is your love for me which makes you unjust, but—oh, what am I to do?' she cried out suddenly, starting up and leaning her head against the mantelpiece.

'My dear,' said Miss Ellison tenderly, 'I will try to be just.'

'It is far more difficult to speak now than it was before. If I had known what I know now, I should never have spoken at all. Before this, Lucy's state of mind hardly seemed serious. It was as if she were acting a little

play for the amusement as much of herself as of others.'

'And now?'

'Now it is not acting.'

'If she has fallen—for once in her life—head over ears heartily in love, I respect her for it,' said Miss Ellison with emphasis. But her heart sank.

'Yes, only—poor, poor Lucy! What is to come of it?'

'Never mind—it will do her good. However, now that you have said so much, Norma, you had better go on. Does she write all this to you?'

'Yes; she is miserable.'

Miss Ellison, in spite of her excellent resolutions, felt an immediate impulse of distrust arise within her. She asked as indifferently as she could—

'Does she wish you to do anything?' and Norma coloured.

‘Yes—no. No, she only appeals to me to give her time. She seems to think——’

‘What?’

‘She says Mr. Lawrence is going away from home, and she seems to imagine he might come here.’

‘Ah, I see!’

‘He will not.’

‘Is that certain?’

‘How can I tell!’ cried Norma, turning impetuously upon her.

‘Well, my dear, that is what I was thinking myself. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that he does make his appearance?’

‘I cannot see him now—I shall go away.’

She was so evidently suffering that Miss Ellison restrained an exclamation of impatience.

‘Very well,’ she said quietly; ‘but why?’

Norma flung back her head, her beautiful eyes had almost a hunted look in them.

‘Don’t you see,’ she said, ‘the position I have put myself into? I allowed Lucy to go to this place knowing nothing of how matters really stood; she did not understand that Mr. Lawrence really—really cared for me, and I let her think that I should never marry again. Even now—though, somehow or other, she seems to guess a little about him—she fancies I shouldn’t change, she feels as if all his love were just wasted. Indeed, indeed, Mary,’ she went on humbly, ‘I thought I was acting fairly by her. I held back, in order that she might prove it for herself, and because it didn’t seem as if she really cared—it was a sort of fancy. That was what I meant when I said it was so hard to know right from wrong. I see now that I was wrong.’

‘Yes, I think you were,’ said her friend quietly. ‘Take care that you don’t do what would be worse’

‘How?’

‘Try to make two wrongs take the place of one right.’

Norma looked at her, then moved impatiently.

‘Whatever happens,’ she said, ‘I must do what I can to atone to poor Lucy.’

‘For what?’

‘For want of frankness. She was perfectly frank with me.’

‘Oh, I know!’ groaned Miss Ellison. ‘It’s this dreadful frankness which is at the bottom of all the mischief. Was Lucy ever frank before?’ Norma’s look, tender but sad, met and reproached her. ‘There,’ she cried, putting out her hands, ‘I am not going to fall foul of Lucy. Only when you talk of atoning, you frighten me.’

‘It is what we can seldom do,’ said Norma in a low passionate tone. Miss Ellison looked at her. Her beautiful face, on which the fire-light fell, was stirred by pain, yet strong with

a deeper feeling, which conquered and transformed pain. It was the face of a nature capable of such intensity, of so much sacrifice, that her friend felt her arguments, her persuasions, shrivel up before it. And yet she knew, by the force of her own common sense, that peril lay before Norma, that she must be the one to defend her against herself, and to restrain that ardent impulse which she admired yet feared.

‘No,’ she said, ‘you are right. It is what we can seldom do ; and for women especially, perhaps it is in mercy that the opportunity is not often put into their hands, because they are seldom just.’

Mrs. Winyeatt appeared to think over these words. She hesitated, then asked—

‘Why do you speak of being just?’

‘Ah, Norma! because it is not just when we drag others into our own sacrifice. We wound their hearts, we offer them up un-

willing ; we have no right to force them to share our pain. My dear, you would never flinch from pain yourself, but what I fear for you is that you would be so carried away by your own noble impulse that you would not recognise the torture you were inflicting upon others.'

'Somebody must suffer,' said Norma rather obstinately.

'But if you take the law into your own hands, aren't you afraid that it may be the wrong somebody?'

'Oh, if I could only bear it all myself!' She uttered this cry as if it were wrung from her, and in it Miss Ellison fathomed some measure of the pain she was contemplating.

'But you cannot,' she said tenderly ; 'and what has Mr. Lawrence done that you should inflict it upon him? So far as I can see, he has acted consistently throughout, has loved

you straightforwardly, has been very much snubbed for trying to tell you so, and has now to be offered up on the shrine of Lucy's vanity. I am not hard upon Lucy in saying this. You know it yourself.'

'It is not vanity now,' Norma said in a low voice.

'I don't know. I am not sure. Perhaps, as you say, I am not a fair judge. But granting your point of view to the full, I cannot see that it makes any difference. Come, Norma, do you for one moment suppose that if you reject Mr. Lawrence he will turn to Lucy?'

'He may,' said Norma slowly.

Miss Ellison jerked up her chin with a provoked gesture.

'Oh,' she cried, 'I think the people who are wanting in vanity are rather more irritating than those who have too much! I give you up. I wash my hands of you.'

Norma's eyes were turned on her with wistful appeal.

'No,' she said with a faint smile, 'you will not. I am not afraid. Even if I am wrong, as I may be, you would never find it in your heart to desert me.'

'I don't know,' grumbled Miss Ellison. 'I wish I could see the letter you are going to write to Lucy. I suppose you would not show it to me before sending it?'

'I can't do that,' she returned gently. 'I promise you, however, that I will think it well over.'

There was no doubt that she carried out her promise, for the words of her answer floated before her mind all night, and she tossed about with no more than brief snatches of sleep. What made it especially difficult for her was, that with all her quick sympathy she could not enter into Lucy's feelings, could not put herself in her place. She knew that

she herself would have died sooner than declare her own unsought love as Lucy had declared it; it appeared a degradation of what should have been profoundly sacred. This did not alter the position, but it deprived her of the spring of sympathy which makes sacrifice a joy.

Before she went down in the morning she wrote the letter. At breakfast she was quiet, but so tender and charming with Agnes that the little girl said rapturously—

‘I wish I always had you all to myself, mamma! Don’t you think it’s much nicer when there’s nobody else?’

‘What, not even your godmother?’

‘I don’t mind her,’ said Agnes considering; ‘I was thinking of Aunt Lucy.’

She expected a reproof, but none came. Her mother was looking at her almost strangely. ‘You and I must be a great deal to each other, mustn’t we?’ she said with a

thrill. Agnes, who was not sentimental, and was pleased to have escaped, thought the moment favourable for a request.

‘Mother,’ she said engagingly.

‘Well?’

‘Look what a beautiful morning it is. Don’t you think it would be rather nice if Miss Fox and I were to go for a walk?’

‘Very well,’ said Mrs. Winyeatt abstractedly.

‘And may we go into the town?’

This pushed advantage aroused her mother.

‘What are you talking about? A walk before lessons? Oh, Agnes, that was only when you were ill!’

‘But you have promised!’ cried the little girl gleefully. She jumped down from her chair and rushed at her mother. ‘You have promised!’

‘Because I wasn’t thinking. However,

that was my fault, wasn't it? Suppose I take you with me, then, and we will give Miss Fox a holiday. Will that do?'

'Oh, lovely! Where shall we go? Shall we go to the pier, and then back by the ships into the town?'

'No; I must first of all post a letter.'

'There will be plenty of time when we come back. Do let us go to the pier first.'

'No,' her mother repeated, and this further concession Agnes found it impossible to gain. She looked rather curiously at the letter, as Norma laid it on the table in order to tie a silk handkerchief round the child's neck.

'Only to Aunt Lucy?' she said discontentedly. 'And such a thin letter!'

'But there is a good deal in it,' returned Norma, in rather a strange voice.

She said very little more until they reached the pillar-box, and Agnes stretched out her

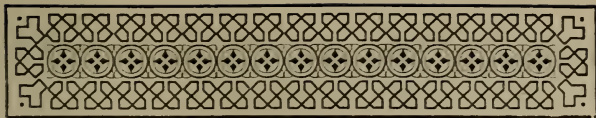
hand for the letter, which according to custom she was going to drop into the box. But her mother put aside her hand, and posted it herself quickly and nervously. The little girl pretended to pout.

‘I am very glad it is gone,’ she said; ‘it has made you quite funny.’

Norma thrust away the pain that was goading her; she began to talk to Agnes in the way in which the child delighted, taking the common things which passed, and with the most delicate touches of imagination and fancy, weaving them into a sort of romance. It was the only time in which she ever gave rein to these imaginative gifts, and could they have heard the dainty story, others besides Agnes would have listened entranced. The two wandered about the picturesque and busy inner harbours, where were quaint incongruous vessels, and landing of odd cargoes, and smell of tar, and lap of green water against

the grey stone walls, and about all Norma had something to say, tender and humorous fancies with which to clothe grimmest realities. Agnes listened, rapt ; every now and then, when something more especially appealed to her, she gave her mother's hand a little appreciative squeeze ; when the words at last died away on the teller's tongue, died, brokenly and vaguely, as if some masterful thought had overpowered the playful fancies, she only sighed and was silent. They were both silent as they went home by the sea, which was rolling its strong surf towards land under a luminous grey sky.





CHAPTER XXIII.

He who will not answer to the rudder, must answer to the rocks.—*Breton Proverb.*



WHETHER it were from the chill, or the terror, or both combined, Lucy had felt ill ever since the day of Major Macarthy's death, and this illness, which seemed to prove a very sensitive sympathy with their own trouble, made her doubly dear to Mrs. Lawrence. But it was after her talk with George Lawrence in the garden that she flagged more perceptibly. She did not see him again alone, and he made no further comment upon her looks. She

asked his mother one morning whether he was going to be long absent.

‘For not more than a week,’ Mrs. Lawrence said eagerly. ‘It is very vexatious that he should be obliged to go at all, but I suppose it is necessary ; at any rate, he certainly thinks it so.’

It was on this day that Lucy wrote her miserable letter to Norma. If she had not been really ill, perhaps self-control would have gained the day ; but it was, or seemed to be, a relief to body and mind to pour out her wretchedness, and when once she had begun, the tide flowed stormily on. It is probable that she hardly knew what she wrote, what she urged upon Norma, for in her mind was something of the incoherence of fever. One thought had laid its iron grasp upon her, and having once admitted its power, it tyrannised until it turned her into a machine. She was convinced that her happiness lay in Norma’s

keeping. Forced to recognise Lawrence's love, she argued against it with all the weak theories she had formed ; it was a fancy of the moment, it would burn itself out, it would be entirely quenched by rejection. These theories were weak, but she had, it was true, a weapon the strength of which she did not herself realise, when she appealed as Paul's sister to Paul's wife. Give her time, that was the burden of her prayer. She owned that all was changed ; she told Norma that she saw how wicked she had been in speaking of marrying him without love. 'Oh, all that you said has come back to me a hundred times,' she wrote ; 'but now, dear, dearest Norma, everything is different, and you need not scold me for *that*. I am miserable, miserable ; have a little pity !' To Norma this strange outpouring was like the rending off the veil of a woman's self-respect, and so incomprehensible that her sympathy could not

reach or touch it, but the cry of misery pierced her heart, and she could no more have been indifferent than have passed by a starving man with the food that would save him in her hands. Sympathy she might have none, but compassion would serve Lucy as well.

Her answer came on the day that Lawrence left. Martin had been seriously uneasy about her young mistress of late, and this day she was sure something was wrong. Her eyes looked bright, there was a red spot on each cheek, and fits of alternate excitement and tearful depression. The excitement lasted while George was in the house; he thought her better, and said some kind little nothing about expecting to find her quite well when he came back. She detained him for a moment when he had said this with his good-bye.

‘When are you coming back?’

‘On this day week,’ he answered, struck by a sudden abruptness in her voice. ‘That is the earliest date.’

‘You will be all the time in London?’

‘I can hardly say. There or near, probably,’ he said smiling. ‘I shall be guided by circumstances.’

‘Don’t be longer,’ she said, letting her eyes drop.

He looked quickly at her, conscious of an odd thrill of interest, unlike anything he had felt here before, but the next minute he had finished his farewell and driven off. Lucy sank down on a low chair.

‘He is going to Dover,’ she reflected, ‘and if Norma sees him she will forget everything!’

Instantly her mind, always fertile in expedients, began to work at the possibility of weaving some plan for preventing that meeting. She had, she felt sure, two or three

days of safety ; Lawrence would plunge into the business which took him to London, set it going, and probably on the fourth or fifth day of his stay, run down to Dover. But all her thinking could not bring forward any plan, and she grew more and more sick at heart over the picture she conjured up. It was curiously characteristic of the shallower nature, that although she knew well the strength of Norma's sweet steadfastness, she distrusted it here, and believed if Lawrence avowed his love he could beat it down. Meanwhile her feverish strength failed quickly now that he was gone, and she no longer tried to conceal her languor ; all the talk seemed inexpressibly wearisome, and when luncheon was over she pleaded a headache and went to her own room. Neither sleep nor rest would come to her ; she jumped up constantly and paced the room, thinking all the while how she could make this visit of

Lawrence's—by this time a certainty in her mind—powerless. Martin grew so uneasy about her that she went to Mrs. Lawrence and begged that Mr. James might be sent for, and Lucy, rather frightened at the thought that illness might be coming upon her, did not refuse to see him.

‘If he will give me something to make me sleep, I shall do very well,’ she said.

When death has been busy in a house he leaves behind him a sense of insecurity which is in itself an alarm, and Mrs. Lawrence's thin face looked whiter and more lined than ever. When Mr. James came down she met him in the hall.

‘Nervous prostration, and a chill mixed up with it,’ he said at once. ‘She will require care, no doubt, but I see no reason for apprehending a serious illness. I'll send over something and look in again to-morrow.’

In spite of the sleeping draught, however,

Lucy had a bad night, and in the morning was so unrefreshed that Martin—also impressed by what had lately happened—remarked that she wished they were back in Dover, or had Mrs. Winyeatt here to nurse her.

‘And I’ve half a mind, ma’am, to write and tell her.’

‘No!’ cried Lucy impetuously, turning upon her, but the next moment she leaned back in her chair and began to turn this new idea in her mind. If Norma were to come there in Lawrence’s absence? There was time. Lucy would take care that she went home the day before his return, and what keener cut could he receive than to learn that she had chosen the time of his absence for coming to see her sister? The more she thought of it, the more it seemed that here was the plan she had been searching for, and she wondered at her own want of invention. But it must be done quickly. ‘I believe it

would be a comfort to see Mrs. Winyeatt,' she said languidly, 'but she could not come all this way—how could one ask her?'

Martin was eagerly certain that she would. Mrs. Winyeatt would bring Chambers and go into lodgings at Rivermouth, and think nothing of it. And she was sure the seeing someone would do Miss Winyeatt good. Martin, in fact, was secretly hoping for an influence which should draw her young mistress back to Dover. The shadow of sorrow still rested upon the old grey stone rectory.

'Well,' Lucy admitted, 'if you wish it so much, you may write. Write in your own name, and say nothing of having spoken to me, because I don't wish Mrs. Winyeatt to feel herself obliged to come. And do not mention it in the house; it might frighten Mrs. Lawrence.'

Her heart beat more quickly; she felt as if

she had taken a daring step, and one hedged in by possibilities of failure. Illness, moreover, was at work, and made her more nervous and fanciful than was usual with her. It might succeed, it might fail—and if it failed, as her hot-headed miserable fancies assured her it would, she felt as if she had not the strength to stand up against the stroke. By failure she meant the coming together of George and Norma.

It was no wonder that the doctor told Mrs. Lawrence that there was more excitement than he could account for. Could she enlighten him as to its cause?

Poor Mrs. Lawrence! She would have herself laid it on her son's shoulders, but that George's words to her on the matter had filled her with perplexity. She clung to her opinion, however, finding it more effective when his undisguised amazement was absent. But it was of no use for the doctor, such

causes remaining demurely in the background, for those sagacious individuals to discover if they can for themselves.

‘Well,’ said Mr. James, glancing at her, ‘we must do the best we can, keep her quiet, and try to get some sleep. To-morrow may see a distinct change for the better. By the way, do you know that delicate little Polly Medland is ill?’

‘No; I hadn’t heard it.’

‘Ah, you miss Major Macarthy. Somehow or other, if a person’s finger ached, he always knew of it. Poor fellow! *I* never knew such a heart.’

‘He had more time than most people,’ Mrs. Lawrence said hurriedly, with a touch of the old pang. But her heart immediately smote her. ‘You are right,’ she said. ‘He can never be replaced.’

‘The rector was very much cut up by it,’ remarked the surgeon, ‘and I don’t wonder.

Those two were a great deal to each other ; and the end was altogether very sudden and terrible. Have they told you how the people keep his grave covered with flowers? Well, I mustn't stay gossiping, but I will send up something for Miss Winyeatt, and hope to find her better to-morrow.'

Lucy stayed in her own room, refusing to see Nelly, though she could not shut out Mrs. Lawrence. She pleaded head-ache, however, as an excuse for solitude ; not that she liked it, but that her nerves were too irritable for endurance of conversation, and she preferred to have only Martin in the room, and to throw her a remark or two when she was so disposed. Her mind had now seized feverishly on the coming of Norma, and it appeared to her in quite a distorted and magnified aspect, as if, indeed, it meant everything, and her fortunes hung upon the test. The letter could not reach Dover before the middle of

the next day, and when she had endured until that time, and still no sign came, she was in a pitiable condition of nervous exhaustion.

Yet Norma lost not one moment in sending a telegram. Had George Lawrence been at home she would have hesitated, perhaps reluctantly given up the thought of going to Marlham, from the conviction that Lucy would not endure her presence. But he was away—would be away for a week, and her mind at once ran through the same train of reasoning which Lucy had adopted. She could go, stay one or two nights, and be safely home again before George's return. This thought she thrust away from her, called Chambers, and told her they were to go to London that night. Then she wrote a note to Miss Ellison, suddenly remembering that she was going to stay with a sister near London on that very day, and had proposed to take Agnes with her. Now there seemed no

reason why the little girl should not go. There was not time to reach Rivermouth before night, but by sleeping in London she could be there the next afternoon.

Partly owing to Lucy's confused head, this possible arrangement had not come before her, and the telegram which alluded to it filled her with dismay. Visions of Lawrence and Norma meeting floated incessantly before her eyes. She pictured his looks, she heard his words ; in vain she pressed her hands to her hot temples to try to shut out sight and sound, until as, naturally, the excitement increased the miserable feelings of illness, she was seized by a new fear—that when Norma came she might find her so ill that there would be more than excuse, there would be an absolute reason for her remaining to nurse her. What a fool she had been not to think of this !

Mrs. Lawrence, coming up, was shocked

at the girl's looks, but Lucy assured her repeatedly that she was really better.

‘I shall be quite well in a day or two, and you will have me downstairs with an enormous appetite,’ she said, and then added hurriedly, lifting the telegram with thin fingers, ‘Imagine the surprise of hearing that Norma—my sister-in-law—is coming to see me!’

‘Mrs. Winyeatt!’ cried Mrs. Lawrence startled.

‘Yes. It is simply absurd, but that silly Martin has been writing home, I find, and said I wasn’t well—you know how servants exaggerate—and so Norma is seized with a sudden fancy to come and see for herself.’

‘Really!’ Mrs. Lawrence said briefly and stiffly. She immediately felt sure that Mrs. Winyeatt was coming here for a purpose, making a pretext of Lucy’s illness, and her prejudices rose stoutly up against her. Lucy

glanced at her, and knew that in George's mother she would have her best ally.

‘It is very dear of Norma,’ she murmured.

The other was silent, with the silence which is more contradictory than the most positive words, but Lucy's inconvenient conscience pricked her into repeating her remark.

‘It is very kind and—very impulsive,’ she added; ‘she will go to the inn at Rivermouth and drive here, no doubt. I wonder how you will like her?’

‘I wonder!’ returned Mrs. Lawrence, in a tone which contained little doubt. Lucy looked at her, and let her head fall back with an access of weariness.

‘I am afraid people will think me much more ill than I am,’ she began; then—‘Mrs. Lawrence!’

‘My dear child?’

‘Please don’t let anyone suppose that I am very ill. Don’t mention to Mr. Lawrence, for instance, if you should be writing to him, that Norma has thought it necessary to come. He would think—I don’t know what he might not think!’

‘I should not dream of alluding to it,’ said Mrs. Lawrence eagerly. ‘It would certainly make him very uneasy.’

She made the promise hurriedly, with a quick sense of relief. If Mrs. Winyeatt had been anyone but the person she instinctively dreaded, she would have welcomed her with open hospitality; now her feelings were so far from friendly that when she went downstairs she spoke to the rector and to Nelly with keen indignation of her folly.

‘I don’t know,’ said the rector. ‘Recollect she’s Miss Lucy’s own kith and kin, or the nearest approach she has to them. I must own I think she’s right.’

‘Because you can only look at it from one point of view,’ said his wife in a vexed tone. When the major died, she had felt that it was impossible she should ever wrangle again, but at sixty the habits of life are too strong to go down before even a tragedy. ‘That is so like a man!’

‘Very likely, very likely,’ he retorted. ‘That, my dear Fanny, is owing to the fact that men consider matters in a straightforward and sensible fashion, while women have the most unaccountable habit of trying to look round corners. If Mrs. Winyeatt comes—I suppose she is not to stay here?’ he demanded, struck with sudden anxiety.

‘I shall not suggest it,’ replied Mrs. Lawrence briefly.

‘No,’ said the rector, ‘I should be averse from having a stranger in the house.’

She looked at him, and then turned and gave a large piece of bread and butter to

Toby. The dog, who ever since that day had been free of the house, ran such a chance of being spoiled, that had it not been for the modesty and faithfulness of his disposition, there would have been little hope for him. As it was, he accepted it all gratefully, but a certain wistful look, an alert attention to any unusual noise, told them as plainly as words that he had forgotten nothing. Nelly was his slave, but the largest share of his remaining affections was given to the rector, by whose side he trotted about all over the village.

Norma reached Rivermouth late in the afternoon, when a fine rain was falling, and dusk creeping on. She went to the inn, after crossing the river in the steam ferry, and ordered a carriage at once to take her to Marlham. It was ready after what seemed to her an unreasonable delay, and she set off on her journey.

Nothing struck her as beautiful. Grey

mists shrouded the distance, blotted out colour, blurred even the nearer outlines. The hills looked like dull maps, traced with hedges ; the river, when it came into view, was but a dreary line of fog ; and the lanes, choked with mud and dead leaves, sodden and dripping with moisture, made Norma, whose nature was at all times easily touched by influences about her, shiver. At last she would look out no more at the unlovely greyness, and sat back staring at the moth-eaten cushions in front of her, and wondering whether the wearisome ups and downs of the road would ever come to an end.

She would have been glad if she could have held her thoughts in this safe, if uninteresting, groove. But every now and then, in spite of her firm hold, they broke riotously away. She was going to George Lawrence's home ; she was in the country which he had often described to her ; every

minute brought her nearer to his people—and yet, after all, she had nothing to do with them, almost blushed to find herself there, and knew that she must flee away for fear of meeting him. Womanly pride, indeed, which is as sensitive in the souls of some women as it seems wanting altogether in that of others, began to fret under the fear that her coming at all was unwomanly. She was shy, tremulous, doubtful of herself; if she could but have turned round and gone back again, she would gladly have done so; and yet she was conscious of that thrill of eager yearning interest, which made her long to know how she might picture him to herself in the days, the months, the years which lay before her—without him.

When the carriage stopped at last at the rectory door, the maid who opened it little thought that the beautiful woman who stood before her was so dizzy, so trembling, that

for a moment she leaned against the wall, helpless. The next, she said quietly—

‘Will you take me at once, please, to Miss Winyeatt? It is so late that I do not wish to disturb Mrs. Lawrence.’

The maid hesitated, and finally did as she was told. When she opened Lucy's door, Norma went hastily in. Lucy was sitting in an arm-chair by the fire, sitting upright, facing the door, her hands on the arms, her whole attitude one of weak watchful attention. Norma was shocked by the pallor, the straining in her face. She came hastily in, knelt down by Lucy, and put her arms round her.

‘My poor dear!’ she cried, kissing her, ‘have you suffered so much?’

Lucy made a hasty movement.

‘It is nothing,’ she said; ‘don't suppose that there is much the matter with me. Where have you come from to-day?’

‘From London,’ said Norma, surprised at the question.

‘And who was with you there? You were not alone?’

‘Quite alone, except Chambers,’ said Norma smiling. ‘I reached the Great Western hotel late last evening, and left early to-day.’

‘And saw no one?’

‘No one.’

The girl sank back with a sigh, which, if Norma had known it, was a sigh of relief from a nightmare. Her voice, too, became more natural.

‘It was really awfully good of you to come,’ she said. ‘Only think of your taking all that trouble! I suppose that silly Martin frightened you? There is really nothing in the least serious the matter with me, only I have run down, and one can’t get up again in a day.’

‘But you are not sorry I came?’ asked Norma, yearning for some words of tenderness.

‘Sorry? Oh no, very glad. I believe the sight of you will cure me.’

Norma kissed her gratefully; she was always grateful for any sign of feeling from Paul's sister. She kissed her, and Lucy submitted, then drew slightly back.

‘I heard the wheels,’ she went on, ‘but I did not expect you so soon, because I made sure you would be captured downstairs. Have you seen them all?’

‘Not one. It is so late, that I thought I would try to come direct to you, and I succeeded. To-morrow I can introduce myself to them—if they wish it.’

‘Yes, yes, come to-morrow, come early to-morrow,’ said Lucy hastily. ‘I wish I could ask you to sleep here, but I can't.’

‘Of course not,’ Norma replied quietly. ‘I shall do very well at Rivermouth.’

‘I am afraid you will be very uncomfortable. You really mustn’t stay there.’

She looked anxiously at her sister-in-law, but Norma did not read the meaning of the look. She was greatly distressed at the feverish troubled expression in Lucy’s eyes, eager to do anything to tranquillise this perturbed mind.

‘Tell me,’ she said, ‘what the doctor orders you. Do you sleep?’

‘Yes, and dream,’ said the girl shuddering. ‘Don’t talk about it. You can’t conceive what we went through that night. Do you know I saw them drive away, and then he was brought back—dead! It was the suddenness—the awful suddenness!’

Norma’s eyes were dilated. She, too, seemed to be seeing something through the gloom.

‘Yes,’ she said in a low voice, ‘it is awful.’

‘But you can’t imagine what it is to be in it. And then Mrs. Lawrence was in such a state, and I had to run out into the drive, and got chilled. Even now one can’t get away from it,’ she added impatiently; ‘Mrs. Lawrence will talk of it. She thinks she wasn’t kind to him; she reproaches herself perpetually.’

‘Oh, poor soul!’ cried Norma, in quick response.

‘But it is very bad for me,’ Lucy said with petulance. ‘I am sure Mr. James would not allow it if he knew. What time will you come to-morrow, Norma?’

‘Early—as early as you will have me.’

‘Come at eleven, then, and stay all day. You might go back by the river. Shall you see them to-night?’

‘I would rather not,’ said the other shrinking.

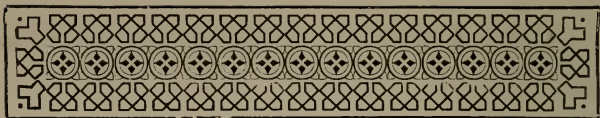
‘Then I will ring for Martin, and she can slip down with you.’

‘At once?’

‘Yes, I’m sleepy,’ said Lucy yawning.

And so Norma left George Lawrence’s house, feeling as if she were a shadowy intruder.





CHAPTER XXIV.

The more one lives, the more one learns to act towards people as if they were inanimate objects, namely, to do what you can for them, and utterly disregard whether they are grateful or not.—GENERAL GORDON.

Thy girdle Truth—to hate a lie.—KEBLE.



Y the next morning the wind had risen, and rushed tempestuously down the valleys, driving before it the drenching showers of rain which had taken the place of the mournful drizzle of the previous day. All the mists had gone, smitten into nothingness by the boisterous power of the wind. Instead of a thick and dull curtain of cloud, all was changed ; clouds, indeed, there were, but they

hurried tumultuously up in separate bodies, and the black masses overhead were succeeded by broken lights, and fitful but brilliant gleams of sunlight flashing on the driving rain, and turning the wet hedges into sparkling light. The river, churned out of peaceful greens and blues, and all time for reflection, rushed along, like some living thing scourged into wrath by the turmoil overhead. Yellow leaves, hanging but loosely to their stems, were caught and whirled into space. Everything was in movement, but movement which was brilliant, exhilarating, invigorating, instead of the gentle depression of the day before.

Something in Norma's own impetuous nature arose as if it were in answer to the challenge of the elements as she drove through the lanes towards the rectory. The carriage was open, and she faced the wet wind with hardy indifference; indeed, she was scarcely

conscious of it, her mind fixing itself upon her coming interview with Lucy. It was impossible for the day to pass without something being said as to that letter which Lucy had written and Norma had answered. She had answered, she had firmly—and counting the cost, the bitter cost—accepted the position: yesterday, Lucy's paleness and weakness had appealed pathetically to her pity, and her heart had confirmed its own sentence upon itself. But to-day revolt sprang up. The strong and vigorous life within her claimed a share in the eager rush of the outer world, the thought of Lawrence and his living claims dominated that duty to the dead to which she had vowed herself. She was shocked that she should waver, that the battle she had supposed to be won needed to be begun again from the very beginning; she had yet to learn, poor Norma! that no battle is won, no victory

secure, till the battle-field is left behind for ever.

It was the harder now that his personality touched her from all sides. She saw him walking before her in the lanes, as she drove up to the house, and looking eagerly at it, it appeared as if he must be on the steps to greet her. In place of him Nelly came unwillingly forward.

‘My mother hopes you will stay all day,’ she said with shy discomfort; ‘and if you don’t mind the river, you might go back that way.’ Then, with this arranged, she led the way into the drawing-room.

Norma looked anxiously at Mrs. Lawrence—his mother. Nelly’s stiffness had chilled her, Mrs. Lawrence chilled her yet more. No one seemed to have a superfluous word at their disposal. She asked for Lucy, and was told she had had a better night; she faltered through remarks upon the scenery,

the climate, the old houses at Rivermouth, but nothing struck a chord of response. At last she stood up, and asked if she might go to Lucy, blank depression enfolding her as with a wet sheet. Nelly took her up, and rushed down again to her mother.

‘Oh!’ she cried, bursting in.

‘Well?’ said Mrs. Lawrence eagerly, her face kindling.

‘Isn’t she beautiful! Did you ever see anyone like her?’

‘She is a handsome woman,’ Mrs. Lawrence agreed coldly, ‘as Lucy always said, but I should never like her.’

Nelly stared at her mother.

‘She is worth twenty Lucys,’ she said emphatically. ‘George will be a greater fool than I think he is, if he looks at Lucy when Mrs. Winyeatt is by. Not like her? Why, she has the sweetest, dearest face!’

Norma, meanwhile, was sitting in a chair

by Lucy's side. The girl, relieved by knowing that Norma was here, and out of the way of all possible meetings, had slept better ; there was a faint tinge of colour in her cheek, and a touch of something that was almost triumph in her eye ; she did not appeal to her sister-in-law like the wan, feeble creature of the day before. Norma would have been glad to have had that strong impulse of pity to carry her over the path which lay before her.

‘How did you like them ?’ Lucy was asking, while she watched her face with an amused smile.

‘I think we were all rather shy,’ said Norma, smiling also, but too loyal to breathe a word against Lawrence's mother and sister. ‘You know that I am not a good person to be plunged into a strange household.’

‘Mrs. Lawrence can be rather appalling, though I never found her so,’ pursued Lucy,

with intention. 'From the very first moment that we met, she has been as kind and nice as possible; she couldn't have been nicer had I been——'

She paused.

'Her own daughter.' Norma finished the sentence quietly. 'That is what she wishes, then?'

'Yes, she wishes it,' answered Lucy boldly.

Norma hesitated for an instant, then she said, 'We must speak of your letter, Lucy, although it is a difficult subject to discuss; but if we avoid it, there will be something hanging over our heads which we shall feel must come down some time.'

Lucy leant her cheek on her hand, and looked at her with a mocking smile.

'Pull the string, my dear, by all means,' she said, and Norma flushed at the tone. She spoke, however, with studied gentleness—

‘Dear Lucy, believe me, I am thinking, I am trying to think of your happiness. When Paul died, I felt as if you were somehow left in my charge ; at any rate, that what I had to do was to attempt to supply his place, however poorly ; I have tried, I have, dear, indeed. I have failed, no doubt, over and over again, but I have tried, and I don’t think any,’—she drew a long breath—‘anything would make me deliberately overthrow your happiness.’ She paused and looked at Lucy ; would she give no generous word of assent ? The girl remained motionless, the same thin smile just touching her lips, and Norma looked away again quickly, as if something in the unmoved face shook her resolution. ‘I should not want to dwell on this,’ she went on rapidly, ‘if it wasn’t such a personal matter, lying between us two.’

‘Three,’ put in Lucy softly.

‘No,’ said Norma, more vehemently, ‘no.’

This of which we are speaking has nothing to do with Mr. Lawrence; it lies absolutely between you and me. I dare not think of him,' she added hurriedly, half to herself. Lucy raised her head for the first time, and looked sharply at her. 'You tell me,' said Norma, regaining her calm with an effort, though a keen observer might have noticed that her voice trembled slightly, 'that you—you have grown to care for Mr. Lawrence——'

'You blamed me for not caring, once,' cried the girl, half defensively.

'I do not think it was that,' said the other woman with an effort; 'it was——'

'Oh, for pity's sake, don't let us go over the old ground! Let it be what you like; it is enough to know what it is now.'

'And now?'

'Now—now——' Suddenly she flung her arms round Norma. 'Oh, Norma, now I know

what it is to care ! I am miserable ! Norma, you won't fail me !'

'No—I will not fail you,' slowly.

'You frightened me, going back !'

'But that is what I must do—I must go back. There are things which I must make you understand, which I could not write.' She had neither repelled nor returned the girl's caress, she sat upright with her hands locked together, and Lucy withdrew herself, frightened, she knew not why. 'You told me once, I remember,' Norma went on, speaking with difficulty, 'that I was not frank with you. I was not. You gave me your confidence—I did not ask for it, but perhaps it would have been better if I could have forced myself to return it.'

'I think it would have been better,' said Lucy coldly, but even as she spoke her eyes fell before the absolutely truthful transparent eyes which Norma turned upon her.

‘Afterwards I thought so,’ replied the other. ‘At the time it seemed impossible.’ The rosy colour flushed her fair face as she went on—‘Lucy, would it make any difference to you to be told that I know—I am sure Mr. Lawrence——’

She hesitated. Lucy made a sharp movement, gave a quick laugh, finished the sentence—

‘Loved you? He told you so, I suppose, at Calais?’

‘He began—he was interrupted,’ said Norma, feeling like a shamefaced girl. ‘But I do not think I could have been mistaken. I am certain now that I was not——’

‘Now!’ Lucy interrupted her in affright. ‘Now! What do you mean? Have you been seeing Mr. Lawrence?’

Norma looked at her in astonishment. ‘Never, since that day,’ she replied with quiet dignity.

‘Go on,’ said the girl, dropping back in her chair, and hiding her face with her thin hand. When she looked so feeble and helpless, Norma’s strong tenderness went out towards her in pity. It cost her a great deal to continue, to rend, as it were, the veil from her heart, but she had set the task before her.

‘Then,’ she said, ‘he went away, and I heard nothing—nothing. After that day it was a blank, as if a great wall had built itself between us. When you told me that you were coming here, what could I say? I told myself that it might all be a mistake. You said it was. You wanted to prove it, away from me. It was to be an experiment, and if it failed, apparently you thought you would be but where you were before?’

She stopped. Lucy made a little movement of her body, but gave no answer, and kept her eyes still covered. The wind at this moment drove a sharp storm of rain against

the window, whirling with it the leaves from a great elm ; but in spite of the black cloud overhead, there was a blue and white radiance beyond, indescribably fresh and lovely. Norma fixed her eyes on it.

‘ I was wrong,’ she went on tremulously. ‘ I should have known him better ; I should not have let you expose yourself to—to what has come.’

She stopped again. Lucy had lifted her head, and was looking at her with eyes which seemed to burn.

‘ What was it,’ she said, ‘ what was it that you did not tell me ? ’ Then as Norma sat silent, looking at her, she added, ‘ Was it that you loved him ? ’

Norma started from her seat and stood upright, staring down at the ground. Lucy, without a waver in her stinging voice, went on, ‘ You loved him, and after all that you have said, you would marry again ? ’

Norma flung herself down by Paul's sister.

'Yes,' she said dully, 'I loved him. I would have married him.' Her voice seemed to implore for some word of forgiveness for this breach of constancy, but Lucy gave her none. Her hands closed sharply on the arms of the chair.

'Have you come to tell me something more?' she demanded in a high thin scornful voice—'to say that you withdraw all you wrote last week? Are—you—going—to marry—Mr. Lawrence?'

The sharpness, the illness, of the tone brought Norma back her self-possession. She lifted her head, and looked into Lucy's eyes.

'I withdraw nothing,' she said gravely.

'Nothing?'

'Nothing.'

The girl suddenly turned upon her with a smiling light caress.

‘How you frightened me!’ she cried petulantly. ‘I thought all this preamble meant something so crushing that I might as well give up altogether. Instead of that, we are only where we were, aren’t we? And you will be a dear excellent Norma, and think how utterly miserable I should be if——’

She paused, and Norma looked at her with yearning eyes.

‘Oh, my dear,’ she cried, ‘I can do what you ask—I can give him up, but—does that bring him any nearer you? George Lawrence is not a shuttlecock, to be tossed from one woman’s hand to another——’

Lucy interrupted her feverishly. ‘I am only afraid of you. If once he understands that you will not marry him, there is no one else. He must see that you avoid him—wish to avoid him. I hope he will go to Dover, and find that you have come here.’ Then as the elder woman started, she added, stung

with quick suspicion—‘You never told me why you think that he has not forgotten Calais!’

‘He wrote to me,’ Norma said simply; ‘he wrote when Agnes was a little better—ah, Lucy, you might have told him!’

The girl flushed.

‘Did you tell him? Did you explain that I knew quite well how ill she was?’

‘I never mentioned you,’ said Norma proudly.

Lucy caressed her again. ‘I might trust you,’ she said, with a laugh which jarred the other like a discord. ‘So he wrote? Well, it was the natural thing to do. And you answered him?’

‘Yes.’

The girl wrapped a shawl round her, rose up, went to a table and brought back a letter which Norma saw to be in Lawrence’s handwriting. Lucy watched her as her eye fell

upon it, but she could not detect so much as a quiver of surprise. She bit her lip. 'She is not jealous—she cannot love,' she said to herself. Aloud she asked, 'On what day do you go back?'

'When you like,' replied Norma quietly. 'I am in your hands, but I do not think I am wanted here any longer. To-morrow?'

'Saturday, please. Mr. Lawrence returns on Saturday. You see I am still quite frank with you.'

'Why should *you* fear my meeting Mr. Lawrence?' cried Norma, stung to sudden passion. 'Don't you understand that you have nothing to fear—that all the pain belongs to me?'

'Then you should thank me for trying to spare you,' returned Lucy carelessly. She leaned wearily back, closed her eyes, and sighed. Norma looked round with something like despair. Lucy was ill, but not so ill as

she had imagined ; she felt bruised and beaten all over ; she was an unwelcome guest to those who were Lawrence's nearest and dearest ; she was forced to remain where she wondered now why she had ever come. Everything she looked at brought some suggestion of his presence, when the best thing she could do was to forget it, to shut it out from her yearning eyes.

If, for this renunciation, she could have felt that Lucy clung to her with affection, blessed her for trying to make her happy, it would have been almost happiness. But she was nothing to her—nothing but a means to an end—nothing more than she had ever been. Those occasional bursts of fondness from the girl were only marks of relief—they touched no deeper depths. Was it all failure, all the struggle of years, all the self-renunciation of the past days? Was the past so unconquerable that her bleeding efforts could not

avail to lift one iota of its crushing weight? She turned her eyes with pathetic pleading upon Lucy, but Lucy was not looking at her; she had got what she wanted, and was pondering over her next step.

‘I don’t know when I shall go back to Dover,’ she said at last. ‘After this illness I should be afraid of a cold place, and when there is east wind, Dover is really unendurably cold.’

‘What shall we do, then? Shall we go abroad this winter?’ asked Norma. All her little self-restrictions now seemed so useless, so uncalled for! The fear of minor things had vanished.

‘I think we must keep separate this winter,’ returned Lucy with a smile. ‘It struck me that if Mr. James really thinks a warm climate desirable, I might stay somewhere in Devonshire. Torquay, for instance, might not be bad.’

‘But not alone,’ said her sister-in-law hastily.

‘Oh no, I am not so advanced. Whatever you accuse me of, my dear, it cannot be of outraging the proprieties. I think I should get my old governess, Miss Sullivan, to come. I did think of Isabel Somerville, but’—she hesitated and laughed. ‘No, I think it shall be Miss Sullivan.’

Norma bent forward.

‘Take care ; take care !’ she cried passionately. ‘Lucy—if all this fails !’

The girl looked at her and moved uneasily, but she only answered with a certain defiance, ‘Then I shall be no worse off than I am now.’ The next instant all the little colour in her face had faded out of it ; she seemed to Norma to be fainting, and she signed towards a bottle of medicine which stood on the table.

‘I have tired you—I have been very wrong,’ said Norma reproachfully, as she

poured it out. She made her lie down, but when she was going to sit quietly by the fire herself, Lucy signified that she preferred solitude. There was nothing for it but to leave her. Downstairs Mrs. Lawrence was alone in the drawing-room, from which ungenial shades Nelly had escaped. Norma tried to forget her first impression ; it was impossible for her not to long to be on friendly terms with George's mother ; it was almost equally impossible for Mrs. Lawrence not to be struck with the sweet and noble face which might have carried most hearts by storm. But Mrs. Lawrence had surrounded hers by a complete palisade of prejudices. She considered Norma's coming almost an insult to her nursing, and an unwarrantable step in all respects. It was true that George was away, but it was unlikely she should have known this fact ; and her beauty, her charm, the fascination of which she was conscious against her will, gave

her an absolute terror. She was stiff, curt, unsympathetic, and every minute Norma's heart sank with a sense that she was being judged and condemned. When she said that she was afraid she had allowed Lucy to talk too much, Mrs. Lawrence raised her eyebrows.

'It is a pity to over-excite her,' she remarked; 'Mr. James has assured me that quietness is absolutely necessary. Perhaps you hardly realise what a sensitive sympathetic nature hers is. It is our trouble which has brought on this illness.'

'I am sure she identifies herself much with you all,' faltered Norma.

'She is as dear to me as if she were my own daughter. I only wish she were!' said Mrs. Lawrence, looking keenly at her visitor. What could Norma say? She turned white, then red. It was an unspeakable relief when the rector came bustling in, keen to see the new arrival after Nelly's loudly-proclaimed

admiration. His hospitable and hearty greeting had never been more welcome.

‘Very glad to see you, Mrs. Winyeatt, though sorry for the cause. But Miss Lucy is on the mend, and will be all the better for your coming. Sorry George is out of the way, though. You know George, don’t you? Perhaps you may see him yet—what day is he coming back, Fanny?’

‘On Saturday,’ replied Mrs. Lawrence unwillingly.

‘And I leave on Saturday morning,’ Norma said quietly. ‘As Lucy is better, I thought of going home to-morrow, but she wishes me to stay until Saturday.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said the rector heartily. ‘Must finish your cure. Can’t you go somewhere, show Mrs. Winyeatt something, Nell?’ Then a change which Norma did not understand crossed his face, he pressed his lips together, drawing them in, and turning

his head hastily. Mrs. Lawrence, who was watching him, said with more cordiality than she had shown—

‘ If to-morrow is fine, Nelly might take Mrs. Winyeatt up the river ; but Job declares that we are in for a spell of rain. Shall we go to luncheon ? ’

Norma understood something of the cause of the rector's agitation later on, when Nelly took her into the garden, and poured out the story of the major with quite unusual effusion. The girl very seldom liked a stranger, but as if to restore the balance, every now and then she was passionately attracted, as now. She watched Norma with furtive admiring glances ; she intuitively recognised the perfect honesty and truthfulness of her fine nature, and for their sake accepted the charm of manner which would not have won her—alone, for she was apt to regard it with suspicion. So much confidence did she bestow, that Norma

seemed in one short quarter of an hour to have entered into the very life of the little family, its interests and its duties. Her swift sympathy, moreover, gave her a special gift of intuition ; she quickly understood the girl's deep narrow feelings, her hatred of unreality, her strong prejudices, her inability to criticise what she loved—this trait caught from her mother, that from her father. And as she told about the major, his simple loving life, the heroic tragedy of his death, Norma, remembering what Lawrence had also told her, could read between the lines, and understand how to Mrs. Lawrence the reckless imprudence, and the love which, in spite of it, he attracted from all about him, had been a perpetual trial, the recollection of which was now remorse.

Rain still came in violent showers, and Nelly took a proud delight in noting Mrs. Winyeatt's indifference to it. Wrapped in her

long blue waterproof, she showed no fear to what Lucy always hated and avoided ; and to tell the truth, the storms without were not so formidable as Mrs. Lawrence's disapproval within. Her coldness weighed painfully upon Norma, for though it was true that George Lawrence could never be anything to her, she longed with all her heart that his mother should care for her. It made her the more grateful for Nelly's sudden attachment.

Before they went in she had seen all the girl's animals, and heard the story of each, connected as it was sure to be with Major Macarthy. Toby, the hero, had been with them all the while, his eyes still watchful, hope not yet quite dead, though dying. Mrs. Lawrence from Lucy's window watched them returning to the house from the stables.

‘ Nelly is really incomprehensible ! ’ she said with a certain displeasure ; ‘ she takes such unaccountable likes and dislikes that there is

no telling what will come next ! You must not be vexed, my dear, if I own that I don't find your sister-in-law a very attractive person.'

Something—what was it ?—smote the girl with a pang. She said with unusual abruptness—

'Norma is very good.'

Mrs. Lawrence shrugged her shoulders. 'My dear, you look at the world with kind eyes. I should find it difficult to forgive her for not trying to make your home happier.'

Lucy opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again, turning restlessly away from the light.

'You have a headache, I am sure,' said Mrs. Lawrence anxiously ; 'you have talked too much. Let me tell Mrs. Winyeatt that you will not see her again to-day.'

'I do not think I will,' said Lucy, clutching at the relief. 'Only please give her my best love, and say everything that is kind.'

Mrs. Winyeatt yielded to her sister-in-law's wish when it was related to her. She asked quietly at what time Mrs. Lawrence advised her to come next day, and then herself suggested that it should be early, and that she should not stay for luncheon. She had tea, at which feminine meal the rector chose to appear, charmed thereto by Mrs. Winyeatt's presence; and she soon rose to take leave, saying that Nelly had proposed walking with her to the river to meet the steamer. Mrs. Lawrence felt ashamed of her own coldness under her visitor's quietly unembarrassed manner, but she quickly consoled herself with the conviction that she was acting for the best, not only with regard to Lucy, but to George.

Norma would have given much to have been alone. The whole day's experience had been full of acute pain. When she thought of Lucy, a kind of shame swept over her. The

idea of any girl—the idea of Paul's sister—setting deliberately before her eyes the resolve to marry a man indifferent to her, was so humiliating that her own renunciation in her eyes shared the humiliation, and became a thing at which she could not bear to look. Perhaps Nelly's presence saved her something. She could not be indifferent to the beauty which disclosed itself as they walked along, the stormy beauty which transformed all the homely features, wild sweeps of storm veiling the distant moor, flashes of brilliant light bringing out the red and golden pomp of autumn ; here and there a tree tossed almost bare of leaf, here and there an elm as green as if it were the height of summer ; all this wet world a world of dancing lights, of exhilarating movement, of lovely blending colour. The cottage gardens on the hill were sheltered from the gale, and were still full of flowers, but in one house a corner of the

thatch had been ripped off, and Nelly stopped in dismay.

‘ Oh,’ she cried, ‘ that is over the room where Uncle Tim’s poor little lame boy sleeps. I must go and see. Do you mind walking on by yourself? The steamer is not due for quite a quarter of an hour.’

Norma gladly consented. She went down the steep stony hill, seamed with ruts along which rushed little channels of water, and looked with some curiosity at the houses on each side. At the foot of the hill a turbid river was flowing. Just as she reached the ferryman’s house, the door opened, and a great red-faced girl came out, her face disfigured with crying. Meeting her thus face to face, Mrs. Winyeatt could not have passed by without asking her what was the matter, nor could the girl, rough and rude as she was, resist the sweet kindness of her manner. She even forgot to wonder who she was.

‘It’s Polly,’ she said, jerking over her shoulder with a broad red thumb. ‘Doctor says her wawn’t get no better’—and then she began to sob again with a violence which shook her great frame convulsively.

‘Will you tell me about it?’ asked Norma tenderly. ‘Perhaps we may think of something which can help her. Tell me about Polly.’

‘You can go in if you will’—still pointing; then moved by a stronger impulse, she pushed open the door, thrust her head in, sobbing, ‘Here’s a lady come to see Polly’—and signed to Norma to enter.

A young girl, whose face told its tale too well, sat working and coughing by the fire; an elderly woman, hanging up newly-washed clothes to dry in a corner of the room, came forward, dusted a chair with her apron, and invited Norma to sit down with ready courtesy. The room, with its lime-ash floor, struck the

visitor as very damp and sunless. She began to explain, but it was evident that no explanation was required, both the grandmother and Polly taking her presence quite simply. The grandmother talked, the girl kept her eyes fixed on Norma's face, unaffected, apparently, by hearing the doctor's verdict openly discussed. It was not the first time that Norma had been dumbfounded by the stoicism of the poor.

‘But did he not say that something might be done?’ she demanded eagerly.

‘If us could get her away to some place high and dry, he said her'd have a chance. But where's her going to, I should like to know? Noa, her must just bide here, and us must do what us can; only I wawn't have her trapesing about with that great Ida Coombes.’

‘Oh, but we must see, we must try; I will talk to Mr. Lawrence!’ Norma's delicately impulsive face was aglow with protest against

this passive acquiescence. The old woman shook her head.

‘ If the major had been alive now, he med have thought of something. Poor gentleman! You’ve heard all about ’un, noa doubt, mum ; ’twas a bad job, sure enough ! I watched ’un go by here that very morning, and I niver thought ’twas the last time as we’d ever see ’un go up and down.’

Norma stayed until she had learned the circumstances of Polly’s life, and plans quickly rose up in her mind. She promised to come the next day, and left hurriedly, fearing that Nelly might be waiting. Nelly was not in sight, but Ida Coombes, redder than ever, was standing on the opposite side of the road in company with a young fisherman, and a heavy basket of potatoes. Directly Norma appeared, she seemed struck with an access of shyness, and turned sharply to her companion, pointing to the basket.

‘ Hayve ’un up,’ she cried. ‘ What a vule you be, Tom Taylor!’ But she softened as Norma crossed the road, and her eyes interrogated her wistfully.

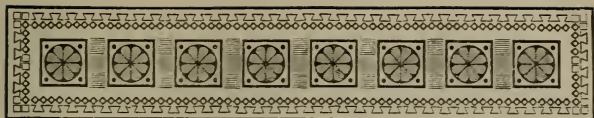
‘ Don’t despair,’ said Norma kindly ; ‘ I am coming again to-morrow, and by to-morrow we shall perhaps have thought of something to do her good.’

The girl turned roughly away, but it may have been to hide the tears which had rushed into her eyes.

‘ Come on, Tom,’ she called loudly ; ‘ what be standing staring for ? ’ She started up the hill, met Miss Lawrence coming down, and showed no sign of recognition. Norma perceived that Ida Coombes was not on the best terms with part of her world ; she recognised a *farouche* proud temper, and under a coarse exterior a strong power of loving. Love for Polly was in all probability the humanising element in her life. For herself she was

thankful for this newly-awakened interest, which helped her to thrust away that ever present personal pain. When she reached Rivermouth she at once sat down and wrote a letter to a convalescent home which she knew very well in Surrey, giving the circumstances of the case, and desiring them to telegraph to her the following morning. Then she sent out Chambers to post her letter and buy some flannel, at which the two worked away till the weariness of the day made itself almost overpoweringly felt. Not till then did she venture to go to her room. And, after all, half the night was spent in fighting a wild rush of passionate regret, and the morning was near its breaking before she fell into an exhausted sleep.





CHAPTER XXV.

A strong man,
For where he fix'd his heart he set his hand
To do the thing he will'd.—TENNYSON.



HE telegram came to Mrs. Winycatt while she was at breakfast. There was a vacancy at the home, and they were prepared to take the girl at once. She went out, bought some warm things at a shop close by, engaged a boat, and was rowing up the river while the day was quite young.

The wind had blown hard all night, and had got the upper hand of the rain, and there was a delightful freshness and sparkle in the

air. The river, still turbid, rushed strongly along, swollen by the rains of the day before, and by the hundred little moor-streams which leapt down from their misty heights. Norma tried to fasten her thoughts upon what she saw; first the vessels, with which the harbour was crowded, then the old houses, the boat-building yards, the great training ship, with its world of young life; afterwards, and almost suddenly, came the quiet of wooded banks, rich with every tint of autumn. The current was powerful, and the men made head but slowly; but they knew every turn of the river, and took advantage of all they could, so that after a time they crept round the last curve, and saw the Marlham cottages clambering up the hill.

No Ida was visible. Norma knocked at the door, and found Polly and her grandmother, as on the day before; but while she was explaining her plans, the old ferryman in

his blue jersey came in, pulled his grey forelock, and laid his oil-skin cap upon the table, by the side of a basin full of greens. The three listened with a passiveness which to Mrs. Winyeatt seemed amazing; she was prepared for doubts, for objections, but none were offered; it might have been the most natural thing in the world that an absolute stranger should carry the girl away into a new existence.

‘Her might so well go,’ said the old woman, addressing her husband. He nodded, and listened while Mrs. Winyeatt unfolded her plans and her bundle. The grandmother felt the flannel between her finger and thumb with satisfaction, and Polly at last flushed a little. It appeared to Norma that all was calmly accepted with a want of questioning which almost shocked her. What right had they to trust her so completely? She asked whether they would not come up and see the

rector or Mrs. Lawrence, so as to hear their opinion? No.

‘Ef her’ve got to go, her can go,’ said the grandfather placidly.

So it was settled. Or rather Norma bade them give her a final answer when she came down the hill again that morning, and then set herself to climb the street, feeling as if Ida Coombes, had she been present, would have been a more stormy power with which to reckon.

She walked quickly. When she reached the top of the hill she was breathless. She felt the need of either bodily exertion, or of some mental action which should keep her thoughts from drifting into one always open channel. If she could not force them to be occupied with Polly Medland, they were quivering with the wonder of what fresh pain she would be called upon to endure that day. She was a very brave woman, but if she could,

how gladly would she have fled from what lay before her !

After all, as is often the case, it passed off better than she expected. Nelly was on the watch for her, with a lovely bunch of autumn roses, which she was to take away ; the rector came out, cordially ready to welcome, the sun shone, the grey rectory looked more friendly. Father and daughter were astonished at the promptitude of her plans for Polly Medland ; she proposed to take her the next day, spend Sunday in London, and on Monday go with her to the home in Surrey.

‘Why to-morrow ? Stay till Monday,’ pleaded Nelly.

‘She’s right,’ added the rector ; ‘stay and see George.’

Norma hurriedly explained that this was impossible ; for some reason, which she did not attempt to make clear, her presence in

London was absolutely necessary. But she listened with yearning interest to the little remarks the rector let fall about his son; however inadequate they seemed—however wanting in understanding—they were sweet, they did something towards satisfying the hunger of her heart. It made her angry that his stores of learning and experience should have no better appreciation than to be set down as crotchets picked up when running about the world, but it soothed her when the father said in quite another voice, ‘But he’s a good fellow—a very good fellow. I don’t know how we should have got through all this time without him.’

Lucy was better—much better. It was soon evident to Norma that she intended to keep the conversation on general lines.

‘I am going downstairs this afternoon, and in a day or two I shall be quite well, and driving out.’ She glanced with a smile at

Norma, but Norma was looking calmly at the corner of the church, which could be seen from the window.

‘And you really propose to stay in Devonshire?’

‘I must, you see, if it is thought desirable,’ the girl answered demurely. ‘It wouldn’t do to run dead against one’s doctor. How delighted Miss Ellison will be!’

‘I don’t think it will make much difference to her,’ said Norma provoked.

‘Oh, the greatest!’ returned Lucy. ‘You will be able to give yourselves unreservedly to old women and blankets; the worldly element will have departed; dear Norma, depend upon it, you will enjoy your winter immensely.’

Norma did not answer—she could not. Was the girl absolutely heartless?

Presently Mrs. Lawrence came, bringing a basin of soup for the invalid. She was thorny

with Norma, but less stiff than the day before, perhaps even a little ashamed of her stiffness. She discussed Polly Medland ; thought it very kind of Mrs. Winyeatt, but rash, as the girl, in spite of her passiveness beforehand, would very likely fret, and might prove a great burden. She promised, however, to speak to Mr. James, and to write to Norma by that evening's post if he objected ; she even went so far as to ask her to wait and see him for herself.

But Norma would not. A rebellion was rising in her heart against, not her resolution, but her position. She felt as if she had been entrapped there, and something Lucy said had given her the clue. Put before him as she could not but feel it would be presented, Lucy's illness minimised by Lucy, would it not seem to Lawrence almost a studied insult, timed as it was exactly to avoid him ? And she could never, never set herself right, must

accept misunderstandings, silently drift away from him, seek nothing better. She was glad when she could turn from the rectory; she would be more glad when she had left all behind her.

Nelly again went with her. They called at the ferryman's house, and found there was no change of mind, nor any increase of excitement. There was, fortunately, an early steamer, and as it would be easier for the girl to come by that, than to climb the hill to meet any carriage, it was decided that her grandmother should bring, and Mrs. Winyeatt meet her at the landing-place. And this settled, and Nelly's farewells—half shy, but more enthusiastic than Norma realised—spoken, the boat pushed off; and Norma turned her back upon the white cottages, and the salmon nets shaken out by the breeze under the hill, with a sigh of relief. It was ended—as she thought—at any rate for a time, and she

might be alone with her pain, and prepare to meet the struggle which her heart told her had yet to come. Her heart told her so much, but it failed to forewarn her how near it was.

George Lawrence had two or three days of unpleasant work with lawyers and bankers, he never let anyone in after days know how unpleasant. It was scarcely credible that so small an income as the major's should have arrived at such entanglement, and there was nothing for it—or so he felt—but to place the whole business in his own lawyer's hands, with directions that debts should be fully paid. Nelly had been left executrix.

But Lawrence had made up his mind to try his fortunes at Dover the first moment that he could get away, and by Thursday he tore himself free, and jumped into the train with an exulting sense of escape. It seemed to him a sign of good omen, and he was glad to seize

upon something which pointed in that direction. But having resolved, he would not torture himself with fear and doubt. He had puzzled long enough over her words, he had obeyed the advice which she had evidently given in earnest, and had left her alone. Now the masterful man within him rose stoutly up against further delay, and he swore that he would put it to the touch—if she loved him, he would know it; if there was no hope for him, he would meet it as a man. This time there should be no middle course.

Everything wore a hopeful air. The showers of that day did not touch south-eastern England. Wind was there, and bright sparkling sunshine. As Lawrence passed along the narrow drawbridges of the inner harbours, the waters were full of light, every vessel flung down its palpitating reflection, men were hauling out cargoes, dogs barking; the scene was just one where Norma loved

to linger, and Lawrence looked eagerly on every side, yearning to see her tall slender figure standing in the sunlight. He went on towards the house, picturing to himself how he should find her. If she were out, he would wait for her. How would her sweet eyes greet him—with the old friendliness or the new coldness? Would he see his answer in them at once, or should he wrench it from her by force of his love? He never thought what he should say. That would come—fast enough, strongly enough, he felt—when once he and she stood face to face. He went on with a sense of power, almost of triumph, hot within him.

The parlour-maid smiled with welcome when she saw him, and then looked sympathetically sorry.

‘No, sir; Mrs. Winyeatt is away from home.’

Away from home! His face lost colour, for,

somehow or other, this possibility had never entered into his calculations; Norma seldom left home, and surely if there had been talk of it, Lucy would have mentioned it. Then hope brightened again.

‘Is she by any chance in London?’

‘No, sir. In Devonshire—at Rivermouth. I don’t think Miss Lucy was very well, and Mrs. Winyeatt left here on Tuesday.’

At Rivermouth! Norma at Rivermouth! He had had a few lines that morning from his mother, in which she said that Lucy was certainly better, and nothing of this other—this wonderful news. What did it all mean?

‘Is Miss Agnes with her?’

‘No, sir,’ again. ‘Miss Ellison has gone away for a week, and has taken Miss Agnes. Mrs. Winyeatt is coming back on Saturday.’

The day of his return. It was all inex-

plicable, and his face had a blank dismayed expression which made the servant ask whether he would like to come in and sit down.

‘No, thank you,’ said Lawrence, recovering himself. ‘Miss Ellison, you say, is also absent?’

He walked back to the station. The bustle in the harbour was as brisk and picturesque as when he had passed it just now; the little white dog on board the Belgian steamer was still barking, a machine like a great claw was still seizing great blocks of ice, and dropping them into a vessel, the same sun was flooding sky and sea. Yet how changed it all was! Lawrence walked heavily, almost mechanically, along, revolving what it meant, what it was intended to mean. His face had grown set and hard.

But suddenly he stood still, and brought his stick sharply to the ground. He would

fathom this matter yet. If indeed Norma had done this to let him know that his hopes were vain, he would not accept such an indefinite message, she should tell him plainly to his face. He would go down by the earliest train, and see her either at Marlham or Rivermouth.

Lawrence was no dreamer, it was always a relief to him to fly to definite action. He had received a blow, and he was preparing to meet another ; better that than tame resignation of purpose. He caught his train, saw his lawyer again, and listened unmoved to some remonstrances which that gentleman considered it his duty to make, dined at his club, and the next morning was off by nine o'clock for Devonshire.

Chance decided another question, though not, as it turned out, very successfully. One of the officers of the training-ship, whom he knew, got into the same carriage, and as the

train would be stopped to allow him to turn out at a little special station, Lawrence said he would take advantage of it.

‘I want to get to Marlham as quickly as I can,’ he said, ‘and this will put me well on the way.’

‘If you are in a hurry, I can take you up in the gig,’ said the officer.

Under these circumstances, Lawrence was quickly landed at Marlham ; but before reaching it, he began to be filled with doubt as to whether Norma would not after all be at Rivermouth. Job’s cottage was half-way down the street ; it was possible that there he might find out something, and the good-natured sailor readily consented to wait for the few minutes which it would take him to ask. But before he reached it he was confronted by Ida Coombes.

‘Will that there lady be good to Polly?’ she demanded abruptly but forcibly.

‘What lady?’ returned Lawrence impatiently.

‘The lady as comed from your house, and is goin’ to take her to Lunnon.’

Some thought arrested Lawrence; he put questions to this anxious guardian, who, indeed, was requiring more than grandfather or grandmother, and through Ida’s gruff yet admiring description he gathered that it was Norma, and that she had gone back to Rivermouth. He only waited a moment strongly to emphasize Polly’s good fortune, to which Ida listened meditatively, divided between the trouble of losing her, and pride at having been the one to work this strange event, before he ran down the hill, sprang into the boat, and said with a laugh—

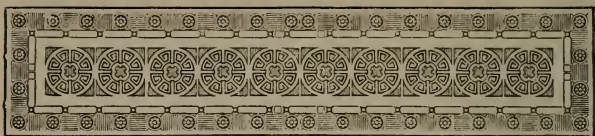
‘Rivermouth—if you haven’t exhausted your fancy for doing me a good turn.’

It was getting dark when they reached it, but Lawrence had worked himself up to a

condition in which he was altogether indifferent to social trammels so far as they related to times and seasons ; it appeared to him that Norma must be conscious that he had come, that he was seeking her, and that now nothing could stand in his way. Yet he was not at the end of obstacles ; they told him at the inn that Norma had gone out. Where ? No one knew, but Lawrence's exclamation was so impatient that Chambers was sent for, and Chambers, delighted to see Mr. Lawrence, was ready with suggestions. There is at Rivermouth—there has been from time immemorial—a broad and open space between town and river, planted with low trees, and a favourite lounging-place for an amphibious population. Mrs. Winyeatt liked the quaint foreign-looking walk ; she had gone there the evening before, and Chambers thought he would find her there now. Lawrence went at once, and when, through the gathering shadows, he saw

the tall figure he knew so well, thrown into strong relief against the still shining river, he felt that, at last, the fates had favoured him. She was standing still, her back to him, and when, startled by his quick step close to her, she turned, she saw the man of whom her thoughts were full.





CHAPTER XXVI.

The only failure a man ought to fear is failure in cleaving to the purpose he sees to be best.—GEORGE ELIOT.

We two walk on
.

With the moon's own sadness in our faces,
Where joy is withered, blossom and bud.

JEAN INGELOW.



HOPED I should find you here,'
Lawrence said, stretching out his
hand.

He had taken her at a cruel disadvantage, at a time when her self-control was slackened, and when she believed herself to be as practically alone as if she had found herself on a desert island. She was thinking of him ;

arming herself against him, it was true, but arming herself in imagination for some future time ; at the present moment almost defenceless. Nor was he disposed to show her any mercy ; he saw something of the disturbance, and, man that he was ! it filled him with delighted triumph. She should have no time to gather her routed forces.

‘Do you know where I have come from ?’ he demanded instantly. ‘From Dover. I went there yesterday to see you, heard you were here, and came down by the first train. I have been to Marlham, and now I have come here. I was resolved to find you.’

There was a new masterful ring in his voice, which she had not heard there before. She turned very white and her limbs trembled, but she pulled herself together.

‘It must have certainly surprised you to be told that I was in Devonshire. Lucy’s maid wrote rather a terrified letter about Lucy’s

health, and as I felt uneasy, it seemed the shortest way to run down and see for myself.'

'Yes, I understand.' But he was merciless. 'Did you expect to see me when you came?'

'I knew you were absent,' said Norma quietly. There was a stone post close to her, and she put her hand upon it, drawing her long fur cloak tightly round her with the other hand. Something in his voice warned her that hard things lay before her.

'You knew it, and therefore you came,' he said roughly. 'Norma, what have I done that you should set yourself to avoid me? Is my love—for you know well enough that I love you—is it something that you will not even treat seriously or friendlily?'

She did not speak, and her silence stung him.

'You changed, and you gave me no reason for the change,' he went on, his tone bitter with suppressed feeling; 'when I spoke you

only answered me vaguely ; when I sent you messages—humble enough, weren't they?—you granted them no notice.'

As he spoke she turned to him with an involuntary start, but the next moment had recovered herself, and was still silent.

'Well,' said Lawrence, watching her, 'is it to be the same now? Are you still going to pretend that you don't understand, that it is nothing? By Heavens, but it shall be something this time!' His voice changed, shook. 'Norma, forgive me! I have tried to do what it seemed you wished ; have kept away from you, though you little know how hard it has been ; have been patient—own that I have been patient!—but all the time I have been waiting. Every day, every hour was bringing me nearer to this moment. Now it has come, now I have found you—oh, my love, say that you love me!—that you will be my wife!'

He was close to her, another moment and she would have been in his arms, but that she put out her hand to keep him back. Her breath came shortly, like a person's in sharp pain, and her voice had a ring which was almost hard.

‘No,’ she said, ‘no! I cannot!’

‘Cannot!’—he repeated the word slowly. ‘Norma, that is not to be my answer?’

‘It is all I can give,’ she said in the same tone.

He made a step back and stood looking at her.

‘No,’ he said quietly; ‘I have the right to something more, and I claim my right. You must give me some reason. You do not say will not, but cannot. Why cannot you?’

His voice was insistent, but she remained silent.

‘Tell me then,’ he persisted, ‘if you were not going from here to-morrow in order to

avoid the possibility of meeting me—and why?’

This time she turned her white face quickly on him.

‘To prevent this!’ she cried. ‘To spare both you and—me.’

He moved nearer her again, and there was a touch of triumph in his words, though he spoke them with studied calm.

‘You admit, then, that it costs you something?’

‘Yes,’ she said passionately, ‘I admit it. It does not alter anything, it only makes it harder for us both; it would have been better if I had left it unsaid, but if—if you consider you have a right to know——’

‘Yes,’ he interrupted, ‘I have a right to know.’ But he did not ask her to finish her sentence. After all, it was finished—to his heart. He was only thinking what it could be which stood between them. Whatever it was,

he was prepared to trample upon it, to beat it down. He could have laughed at the preposterous fancy that any shadowy scruple could separate them, but he knew that to her sensitive spirit, things which seemed trivial to him might become a dangerous force. He must get at it, must drag the phantom into light. 'Norma,' he said steadily, 'I claim nothing from you, but I ask you from the bottom of my heart to be frank with me. Why do you say you cannot marry me?'

'I cannot tell you.'

'Let me find out,' he answered, with the tenderest pleading in his voice. 'Is—is there anyone else?'

'Anyone else?—No!' she cried so impetuously that he almost smiled with the joy of hearing how the secret of her heart flew out in the words.

'No one living, but—is it the dead, is it Paul who stands between us?'

This time her answer was longer in coming, less assured when it came.

‘It should be,’ she said. ‘I am ashamed to think of what has become of all my dreams of lifelong constancy. You may well despise me, I despise myself——’

‘Despise you!’ he said brokenly, but with intense thankfulness, for this dread of his rival Paul had been foremost in his heart, and that once gone he felt as if nothing could remain to fear. He tried to take her hand in his, but she drew swiftly back, and even in the dim light something in her white face struck on his exultation with a sudden chill.

‘No,’ she said sadly, ‘all this changes nothing. Perhaps I have been wrong in saying so much, but I trust you; and though I would have spared you and myself what can only—only be added pain, you have come upon me when I expected nothing, and I have not been strong enough to pre-

tend what would not have been the truth. It may be better as it is, for you see I have hidden nothing—I don't deny—and so when I tell you that nothing you can say, nothing that I can feel, can change me, that I cannot marry you and yet that I cannot explain myself, you will—you must believe, though'—her voice dropped—'you may not be able to forgive me.'

His face darkened. The steady hopelessness of her words gave them a force which he felt, while all his being rose up against them. What was this barrier behind which she had entrenched herself? What was this intangible obstacle, against which he instinctively knew all his powers would be required? He was conscious of an almost overmastering desire to take her in his arms, and beat down these imaginary scruples by force of will, but he dared not. To win her for a moment might be to lose her for ever. He

stood looking moodily at her. They were almost at the edge of the open space which has been mentioned, below which the river flowed along with hungry lap of water against the stones. Every now and then a dark boat swept by; the yachts at anchor were showing lights, lights twinkled from the houses opposite, a train glared redly under the wooded hills. He had never been so near Norma, so alone with her; the hour in which she owned that she loved him should have been one of perfect joy, and yet here he was, baffled, tormented, held apart from her by her indomitable resolution.

‘Norma,’ he said slowly, ‘you cannot expect me to be content with what you have said?’

‘It is all I have to give,’ she answered in the same tone.

‘It is nothing. You are absolutely unfettered. If ever a woman held her life in her

own hands, you are that woman. You have no one so much as to consult. If you told me that you didn't like me, I should have nothing to say against it—you'd have reason enough and to spare. Or if you said I wasn't a big enough man, or a rich enough man—well, there would be a reason. But—oh, my darling!'—he caught her hand in both his, and his voice was broken and hoarse—'you own that all this hurts you, you let me see that I could win you, and then—then you thrust me back, and say nothing but that it can't be!'

She drew her hand away, and her whole frame was shaking like a child's.

'What shall I do? What shall I say?—I can't say anything. Don't you see that I would if I could? You are a man—you are strong—oh, don't torture me!'

The almost inarticulate cry gave him a thrill. He had never seen her so moved.

‘Torture you ! Norma, if I could spare you anything !’

‘Oh, you can ! You must believe me, and ask no questions.’

He shook his head.

‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Then trust me !’ she cried passionately.

He thought before he answered. Then he said, ‘I have no need either to trust or to believe that all you do is from the noblest, purest motives, because I know it—I know it absolutely. But as to whether you are not letting our happiness, *our* happiness, be wrecked on account of some imaginary duty, some uncalled-for sacrifice—as to that I can’t feel the slightest assurance. Dearest, tell me what it is ! Let me judge.’

She drew herself together, shivering. And she seemed to have given up the appeal, for her voice was dull and heavy.

‘I can never tell you.’

‘At least—if this barrier does exist now, it is impossible it can continue—there must be some limit?’

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ he said impatiently, ‘this is too much! You are putting an impossible strain on my patience——’

She interrupted him. ‘You must not talk of patience, there is no question of that.’ It is all over, all at an end from to-night.’

This time he laughed out.

‘At an end! No. To that I have something to say. You may forbid me to hope, but you can’t forbid me to wait.’

‘Oh, how cruel you are!’ she murmured. The next moment she had recovered herself. ‘I can’t forbid you, but I can tell you it is useless, and if I know you at all, I know that you are not the man to persecute a woman. Don’t you see that all that you have said

does not shake me? What I have to do lies before me as clearly as ever.'

The level tone in which she uttered this almost irritated him. It was true, as she said, that she had not moved from her position, neither passion nor pleading drawing from her her secret of resistance. He said doggedly—

'I quite realise that you won't give way. But I don't see how you can deny me the same privilege of obstinacy.'

'Not if I assure you it is useless?'

'I mean to see that out for myself.'

She sighed, and made a quick movement of her hands.

'Then if I implore you?'

But he was still obstinate. Only his voice went back to its more dangerous tenderness.

'Dearest, it is useless. Nothing that you can say will have the slightest effect upon me,

not even if you ask me to do this because I love you, which is a woman's last resource. Because I do love you I will never give you up; this obstacle of yours cannot last for ever, and you shall be mine, Norma—whether or no!’

She turned upon him impetuously.

‘When first you came upon me here, I knew that I ought not to listen to you. It could only make it harder for us both. And yet it seemed that I owed you so much. I believed that if I suffered you to see that—that it was necessity which obliged me to act as I have acted, you would be generous, judge me as kindly as you could, and act kindly—leave me. Oh, I wish I had not foolishly believed all this! It was wrong to see you, wrong to let you speak—it makes it a hundred times more miserable!’

‘Don’t blame yourself, at any rate,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I should have forced you to

listen to me. If I had not found you here, I would have gone after you to Dover. I don't suppose I *am* generous. As for judging you—— But—leaving you—that's another matter !'

When he said this she was walking towards the town, and she let her hands drop with a gesture of discouragement.

'Do you mean,' she said in a low voice, 'to force me to break up my home, and to go out of England?'

'Would you do that?' he demanded, startled.

'I would do anything.'

He thrust his hands into his pockets, and walked on. At last he burst out angrily—

'Oh, I'm not going to—what's your word?—persecute you to that extent! You can keep me out of your house, and I shan't sit on a post and watch you from a distance, if that's what you're afraid of. But I don't

give you up. I will never give you up while I live?

‘Good-bye,’ she said, ignoring the latter part of his speech, and stopping.

He took her outstretched hand in his, but he did not let it go. Was this the end of all his hopes?

‘Norma,’ he cried out passionately, ‘this is unendurable! If I felt there was a just cause for it, I suppose I could bear it; but to be parted for some morbid quixotic fancy!—Tell me one thing. Does Miss Ellison, does anyone know your reason?’

‘One person knows; I will not tell you who it is.’

‘It is a hateful riddle. I shan’t rest till I’ve undone it. I shall ask Miss Lucy to help me.’

She was silent.

‘I believe I have been a fool. I have promised more than I ever intended. What

is it that I have said? That I will not go to your house?’

‘Yes. It is a promise.’

‘A promise unfairly extorted, then. You can never trust to a woman’s justice. But I must have some limitation—I can’t be left out in the cold for ever, Norma!’

His words were almost petulant, but his tone was heavy with an anguish that went to her heart. And she could say nothing. She could only answer by a mute piteous gesture that so it must be; thankful that the merciful darkness hid her eyes.

‘Will you swear something?’ he said suddenly.

‘What?’

‘Swear that if the moment comes—it must come—it shall come—if the moment comes when you are free from this hateful millstone, whatever it is—swear that you

will let me know. There must be no hanging back, no woman's pretences—swear it.'

She hesitated. Then—'If you are as you are now, I swear it,' she said faintly.

He repeated the words ponderingly. 'If I am as I am now? Well, I have your promise, and you will not fail me. Either you or—who shall I say?—I must have one more chance—Miss Ellison? she's friendly—no, Miss Winyeatt. You or Miss Winyeatt will tell me when the barrier's up. Is that all—the best you can give me, Norma?'

Could he let her go? Perhaps she read the struggle in his voice, for she turned swiftly, and without a word went away towards the inn. He made no attempt to follow her, perhaps conscious that she could bear no more, yet that she would not yield, and his own heart was in a turmoil, in which it was difficult to say which feeling was uppermost. Exultation had a large share—

he could not doubt that she loved him, and there were moments in which the certainty of this seemed worth any price that he might have to pay. Since Calais he had been dismally uncertain, and a day before he would have been ready to accept whatever limitation the knowledge brought with it ; but already it had proved so sweet, so intoxicating that the draught could not satisfy him.

For some time, it might have been an hour, he stood there, looking, and heedless of anything about him. At last he followed her steps to the inn, stood for a minute in the doorway, came out again and went to the house of an old sailor whose boat he sometimes used. He arranged that the man should come for his boat to Marlham the next morning, and then went back to the place where Norma and he had stood, and down some slippery steps. The old sailor got hold of his boat and brought her in, and

Lawrence wished him a short good-night, and started for his lonely pull up the river. His thoughts were in a whirl, and he pulled hard, feeling the exercise a sort of outlet, but all round the quiet and soberness of the evening was in curious contrast to his own inner man. The moon was high in the heavens, and flung a long dazzling reflection upon the rippling waters, the hills rose mistily dark on either side, beneath them white houses gleamed here and there, masts of vessels cut the soft gloom ; from the town and the yachts anchored near golden points of light were repeated, wavering, in the water, and gradually, as Lawrence drew up the river, all sound died away except the creaking of the oars in the rowlocks, and the bubbling swish of the water against the boat.

Lawrence pulled hard and thought hard, but all his thinking seemed to bring him not one jot nearer the answer to the riddle.

What did it mean? what possible visionary thing was this which separated them? How could he discover—crush it? Not for an instant did he dream of giving up, but he was like one of the ancients to whom the Sphinx had propounded her mysteries, baffled, tormented, all his happiness hanging on an enigma. It seemed to him that his thoughts travelled everywhere, he forced them to follow one road after another, and yet they never lit upon a discovery—never so much as approached it. For this he wanted a woman's intuition, or a woman's malice.

And meanwhile, what of Norma, poor Norma?

She had been nearer an utter physical break-down than Lawrence had once guessed. He could see that her face was very white, but the darkness of evening hid from him its ashen pallor, and the trembling of her limbs. He had come upon her unexpectedly, when

she was unnerved by all she had gone through, and had let her thoughts stray softly and yieldingly towards him, with the yearning we feel for one from whom we are separated for ever. If she had known she was to meet him she would have braced herself and prepared her weapons, but he was at her side before she had time for so much as a thought of preparation, and the thrill of seeing him all but routed her forces—or so she fancied, for in truth she was too strong to be routed by misadventures.

When—she hardly knew how—she reached her room, she locked her door, and fell on her knees by the bed, pressing her face upon its covering, and trying to shut out thought and remembrance. But they are visitors who will not be denied. Not one word—not one bitter cry of his love—but came back, and burnt itself upon her heart with intolerable pain. She saw him standing before her, she heard his

voice, tender, harsh, always instinct with love, and she found herself answering him with very different words than those she had forced herself to utter. What it might have been to them both—this meeting under the moon! Why had she suffered herself to fall into such cruel bondage—to wreck, as she now knew, a double happiness? She pressed her hot eyes against the cool sheet. Was there no way out of it? Could she not appeal to Lucy? Appeal to Lucy?—with the thought came a dull heavy weight of despair, for if Lucy yielded, what sort of a yielding would it be? She was not generous, she would never forget; all her life long Norma would be haunted by a remorseful consciousness that Paul's sister held her to have spoiled her life. And as she had said to herself before—this was a burden she dared not take up.

Another thought was not so hopeless. When the girl found that her waiting was

useless, would she not voluntarily give it up? With Lawrence's words hot in her ears, with the grasp of his hands on her hands, Norma flung back her head and pondered over this new hope. But Lucy—as she knew of old—was indomitably persistent, and, casting back, she could not remember one instance in which when she had resolved upon anything she had not carried it out. Her methods were never aggressive or violent, but it seemed to her now as if they were as strong as steel. And perhaps Norma did not rate men's fidelity very highly, having seen many of those who had sworn they could not live without her, very comfortably established with wives, and apparent happiness, within not a long time of their rejection. Lawrence, of course, was different, but she was humble enough to believe that even with Lawrence time and obstacles would weary him out, and that he could not but resent what to him must appear most un-

reasonable conduct. And with Lucy persistent and Lawrence weary——

Long that night, long after the world about had gone to sleep, and all the little clamour of the street was hushed, Norma sat by her window, looking out at the river flowing darkly to the sea—looking at years which unrolled themselves in dull sequence. When the crash comes, when sorrow meets us face to face, and will have no more disguise, we cannot take refuge in the consciousness that here is the common lot : from every heart goes up the cry, ‘What have I done? Why is this anguish heavy on me?’ Miss Ellison once said to some one who talked about some terrible blow being God’s appointment, ‘I don’t believe it is His appointment. He can overcome it with good, and He will, if we let Him ; but as for all this misery, I believe it is the devil’s sending.’ And when her friend looked shocked, she demanded whether the

Son of God had not spoken of the infirm woman being bound by Satan—‘lo, these eighteen years’? The words came back to Norma, it seemed as if her heart re-echoed them; though the world were out of gear, and she had to bear her part in its suffering, through all and above all the abiding Love made itself felt in this her dark hour. She was very sad for him and for herself—sadness did not rob her for one moment of her trust.

When Chambers came into her room in the morning, Norma was at last lying asleep, but so white that the maid looked at her with dismay. She treated her fears, however, lightly, saying she had had a bad night, but that nothing really ailed her, and she was glad to remember that she had something to do that morning, and a journey to make. Anything was better than time for miserable thought.

The day was mild though damp, with occasional spit of rain, and flying scuds from

the west—nothing to interfere with Polly's coming. But the hours dragged wearily, for, on the girl's account, Mrs. Winyeatt could not leave by the first train, and she was in deadly terror of seeing Lawrence again, and would not go out until it was time to meet the river steamer, when she walked towards it quickly, looking neither to the left nor right.

Polly was there, and her grandfather, and —Ida Coombes, whose mingled feelings were making her loudly combative. From what Mrs. Winyeatt gathered, she had come very much against the wishes of the old people, but with a sense of responsibility for the slight and fragile girl which was not without its pathetic side, it was so curiously incongruous. It evidently pleased her very much when Mrs. Winyeatt asked her whether she would like to cross with them by the steam ferry, and see Polly into the train.

‘Theer now!’ she burst out, turning trium-

phantly upon the old ferryman. 'An' you and granny said her'd be shamed for me to be here!' Then, stung by some thought, she flung a sombre look upon Mrs. Winyeatt. 'You'm certain you'm not shamed? If you be, I'll bide here.'

Norma put out her hand and laid it on the girl's muscular arm.

'I should like you to come. I'm not one bit ashamed,' she said smiling.

Ida looked at her with eyes which had suddenly grown smaller, then down at the hand on her arm, hesitated, and finally flung herself upon a bundle which Mrs. Winyeatt supposed to contain Polly's clothes, until Chambers told her afterwards that when it was unfastened in the train it was found to contain what Polly called a squab pie (a mixture of mutton, apples, and pastry), half a loaf, a hunch of cheese, six large apples, a pot of cream, and a large screw of lollipops.

Polly and Chambers ate what they could, and Polly cried over the rest. She said it was all Ida's present. At the station Ida hugged her tumultuously, and cast such threatening looks at a porter who grinned over the scene, that that functionary hastened to retreat. And then Ida delivered herself of her last advice.

'Her'll do,' she said, indicating Mrs. Winyeatt by a jerk of her elbow; 'but if anybuddy else tries to put upon 'ee, you let me know, and I'll come and take 'ee away. I weed, if I walked every step o' the way.'

And the last which Mrs. Winyeatt saw as the train steamed out of the station was Ida in tears racing along the platform and waving vigorously.

Something else she saw when she looked on the other side—something which took the colour out of her face.

High up the river, and apart, was a little motionless boat, in which a man sat, also

motionless, watching the train. As it moved along, not as yet having reached full speed, he bent forward, and though he made no sign, she could feel or imagine she felt the intensity of his gaze, the mute anguish of his farewell.





CHAPTER XXVII.

But did one touch of such love for me
Come in a word or a look of yours,
Whose words and looks will, circling, flee
Round me and round while life endures—
Could I fancy ‘As I feel, thus feels he!’

R. BROWNING.



T was not until late that afternoon that Lucy saw George Lawrence. He had arrived the night before, when all the household had gone to bed, having stayed out on the river, and rowed up a long creek under overhanging trees, neither noticing nor much caring where he was going, but with a dim sense that while the struggle within was so fierce, solitude and darkness

and the absence of even kindly eyes, were grateful.

He was wildly angry with himself and with Norma. Why had he yielded? Why had he not forced this foolish fatal secret from her, that he might have tossed it to the winds, stamped upon it, hurled upon it the contempt it deserved? Since the moment that she had left him, he had piled arguments upon arguments; so far as he could remember he had been idiotic throughout the interview, said nothing, done nothing, deserved nothing. He might have laughed her to scorn, he might have refused to be bound by those restrictions over which, here in the dark silence, he ground his teeth. The whole thing, her persistence, his yielding—all was sheer folly; no sane man would have gained his advantages, and then calmly flung them away, as he had ridiculously done. So—his passion.

But through this passion and its protests

there ran the intolerable conviction that nothing he could have said or done would have moved Norma from her steadfastness. Womanly as were her words, pitiful for herself and him, there had never been a moment when they had faltered from weakness of resolve. She had given him no hope from first to last, and with the conviction his own hope sickened and was ready to die in his heart. But after he had gone through a very slough of despond, it would spring up again, and still vigorous, and he would repeat all the old arguments, and go over all the old ground, and convince himself that soon there must be a break in the dark cloud which hung over them. And this break he generally felt would come through Lucy's interference.

Everything had grown so quiet on the river that only the gurgle of the water and the occasional leap of a fish broke the silence. When he began to think about his surround-

ings he could not at first recognise them, until presently he made out the outline of an old mill, ghostly in the darkness. Then he turned the boat, and rowed for the village, reaching it when every light was extinguished, and a barking dog, convinced that he was a man of evil designs, was the only living creature to greet him. He stumbled up the hill between the peaceful white cottages, set in their flowery nooks, feeling strangely tired, and beginning to realise that he had had no food since morning.

The rectory was of course shut up, and dark from roof to ground. He would not alarm his mother by ringing, and felt with some grim amusement that he was homeless as well as hungry. But in the country bolts and bars are not very strictly observed, and he strongly suspected that by making the tour of the house he should find some undefended window. He reached it at last in the old

school-room, and as he knew of old the trick of the shutter, by the help of his knife he managed to get in, then hushed up Toby by a word, discovered a cold pie in the back kitchen, ate it on the kitchen table, and laughed at the thought of the servants' faces when they came down the next morning.

'They deserve a fright for leaving windows unfastened,' he said to himself, as he took off his boots and went up the back staircase, which creaked as it never creaked by day. Luckily for him his room was prepared for his coming next day, and in spite of his misery he slept soundly, while Norma was still watching the stars with her face pressed against the cold window pane.

But he was up the next morning even before his father, early riser as he was, startling the maids almost as much by his appearance as they had been frightened by finding the remains of the cold pie in the kitchen.

He breakfasted upon what he had left, scrawled a note to his mother, merely saying that he had come home unexpectedly, and was obliged to go out early, and then took himself off again, and down to the river. He wanted to find out by what train Norma was going, and this he discovered from the ferryman. Then he took to his boat and rowed violently to Rivermouth.

Norma was not wrong in dreading to go out lest she should meet him, for he watched the inn closely, having persuaded himself by some effort of casuistry that their compact did not come into force until she had left the place. But he strained his eyes in vain until the time for the boat arrived, and she came, safely guarded by Chambers. Then he pulled up the river again, and took up his position where she saw him.

He did not make his appearance at the rectory until late in the afternoon, and turned

off his mother's wondering questions with as few answers as possible. He had come down unexpectedly the day before, had business in Rivermouth, that night and this morning, and had got into the house like a thief to prevent a general disturbance. She was too shrewd a woman not to see that a good deal lay behind this broadly-sketched outline, but Lawrence made it evident that he had no intention of entering into detail, and her uneasiness had to remain unsatisfied.

Meanwhile Lucy had passed a terrified day. That Lawrence should have come in so late the night before—that he should have gone out at so early an hour—what did it, what could it mean but that he had been with Norma? Even if her sister-in-law had been faithful to her promise, Lucy felt with despair that the sight of her would probably stir all those feelings which she persuaded herself might die out for want of fuel, into flame.

One of her strongest hopes had been that circumstances would keep them separate until time, and his anger at her coolness, produced their effect.

When George Lawrence came into the study before dinner, he and she looked at each other quickly. Illness had softened her face, and though she had lost a certain brilliancy, her beauty had gained more than it had lost, and her pleasure at seeing him again added a tender charm which he noticed without understanding its cause. With him she saw at once that things were not going smoothly. He was grave and worried.

‘I am afraid my gloomy prophecies were correct, and that you have had a real breakdown,’ he said, taking her hand kindly, and looking down upon her. She looked very slight and pale in the great arm-chair by the fire.

‘I am well again now,’ she said flushing.

‘I was a little over-done, but it was nothing of the slightest importance.’

‘Mrs. Winyeatt thought it of importance,’ he said at once.

‘Yes. Imagine my amazement at her walking in! Have you seen Norma?’

‘Yes.’

‘She is looking very well, isn’t she?’

‘Yes.’

He was staring at the fire, and his thoughts had flown away to the white face set in evening shadows which kept itself so persistently before him. He did not even know what Lucy was asking. Mrs. Lawrence, who was tearing up papers at the writing-table, looked up.

‘I cannot but think that Mrs. Winyeatt has acted rashly in taking that delicate child into a colder climate,’ she said. ‘I sent for her grandmother and spoke to her about it. All she said was that Polly had set her heart

upon going, and that great Ida Coombes encouraged her.'

Lucy was silent, looking at Lawrence. He said rather impatiently—

'I presume the doctor was the person to ask.'

'Doctors are sometimes glad to get rid of their patients, and I still consider it ill-judged,' persisted his mother. 'It was so hasty.'

'Dear Mrs. Lawrence, don't be afraid,' put in Lucy quickly. 'Norma is not one of those persons who take up a fancy and drop it again directly; everything she says she will carry out thoroughly. Do tell the grandmother not to be afraid.'

She knew that Lawrence was looking at her, and she heard him draw a deep breath when she stopped.

'I am pleased to hear you say so, my dear,' said Mrs. Lawrence; 'but I think you are one

of the people who judge others by themselves, and are always ready to defend.'

'Mrs. Winyeatt requires no defence,' Lawrence replied with a darkening face.

'No, we know her better, don't we?' said Lucy gaily, while the mother pursed her lips together, and wondered at the blindness and wrong-headedness of man. Then the rector came in, and the conversation changed.

It drifted back into the same channel, however, more than once—almost, as it seemed, in spite of everybody. Mrs. Lawrence was antagonistic, and her son displeased, and more irritable than Lucy had ever known him, for the wound was open, and any touch upon it, even of his father's loud admiration, was sharp pain. He could not but turn gratefully to Lucy. It was true that some words she let drop, such as those about Norma's steady resolution, hurt scarcely less than his mother's blame, but it was a different

kind of hurt and carried with it no sting. And Lucy was so anxious to defend, to praise, showed herself so susceptible for Norma, was so clever in bringing in instances of her goodness, that his heart warmed to her, and he felt an eager longing to pour out to her his mysterious difficulties.

But this was not easy. Without apparent drawing back on her part, she contrived that he should never find her alone, setting all her woman's wit to baffle his attempts. Little plans and counter-plans being much to her taste, she wove them now incessantly, and with success. Each day George determined to have his talk, each day she eluded him, for she argued that in the present position of affairs, time was everything. Norma had evidently been true to her promise, and perhaps, after all, more good than harm had been done by the interview which had given her such a fright.

George, despairing, at last appealed to his sister.

‘Nelly,’ he said, ‘help me. I want to speak to Miss Winyeatt.’

‘What for?’ said the girl suspiciously. She did not share her mother’s ideas, but this speech startled her.

‘I want to find out something about Mrs. Winyeatt.’

She looked at him, fingering Toby’s ears the while.

‘I should go to Mrs. Winyeatt herself,’ she remarked. ‘But if that is what you want, I understand why you can’t get hold of Lucy. It’s easy enough, though. We’ve got to take her out on the river to-day; when we come back I’ll go into the Browns’ cottage, and you can keep her outside. I’ll tell her the boy has had the mumps. So he had, six months ago.’

This arrangement succeeded, and as soon

as Lucy found the *tête-à-tête* inevitable, she yielded with an excellent grace.

‘How picturesque and charming it is here!’ she said. ‘There could not be a nicer place for waiting. You should have brought me to see it before, Mr. Lawrence.’

And indeed the place was pretty enough on this brilliant autumn day. The hill, covered with fruit trees, ran sharply down to the beach, and here, raised each on its little causeway, were three or four fishermen’s cottages. Beyond them the hill curved into a promontory forming a sheltered bay. The tide was half high, washing the little beach with silvery ripples, and the tall irregular poles for the fishing-nets gave character to the whole. A boat was drawn up just below them, and on this Lucy herself proposed that they should sit.

‘As I am not quite strong yet, and as Nelly may be for ages in that cottage,’ she

said with a smile. And she added with quite genuine feeling—‘How much she has tried to do since Major Macarthy’s death!’

‘Miss Winyeatt,’ said Lawrence abruptly, ‘I want to enlist your help.’

‘Mine?’ She flashed a ready look upon him, but he was staring out at the river, and frowning slightly.

‘I saw Mrs. Winyeatt the other day. I went to Dover, and found she was here. I came back at once, and spoke to her the same evening at Rivermouth.’

She was silent.

‘I wanted to end a painful suspense.’ He paused, and then said quickly, ‘I needn’t tell you what it was——’

‘You have never told me before,’ she interrupted, with a sharp ring in her voice.

‘It wasn’t necessary, was it?’ he said, glancing at her with some surprise. ‘I’ve never made any secret of it, and I hoped you were

kind enough to feel some interest. Though I don't know that you offered much hope.'

'Perhaps I knew Norma better than you.'

He went on without taking apparent notice.

'I put it to the touch at last. I found her and said what I had to say.'

'Well?'

She was sitting on the edge of the boat, and was holding it with each hand, her grasp like iron.

'Well,' he repeated with a hard attempt at a laugh, 'there it appears to have all ended, and that's why I've come to you. All that she says is that she can't marry me. Why can't she?'

He put the question sharply, almost fiercely, and Lucy looked away.

'You should ask Norma,' she said in a cold yet trembling voice.

'Ask her! I have asked—I have implored.'

There's the rub of it—to have one's—well, to get no reason, only that bare can't. But she and you are everything to one another, and I've pinned all my hopes upon your giving me a hint. I can't make it out.'

'Norma is not like other women—she is very self-contained—she has Agnes—I never believed she would marry again——'

Lucy let fall these sentences falteringly, word by word, and as she said them George Lawrence stood up from the boat against which he had been leaning, and thrust his hands into his pockets, looking at her.

'Not one of those is the right reason,' he said obstinately, 'and I see by your face that you could tell me if you would.'

She started as if she had been stung.

'You are unjust, unfeeling,' she cried passionately; 'you are only thinking of yourself! What have I to do with it? How can I make Norma love you!'

Perhaps his own strong feeling kept him from understanding where hers pointed, or perhaps she was not in his thoughts at all except as a means by which he might reach another.

‘As to that,’ he said slowly, and still looking at her, ‘we understand each other. I shouldn’t come to you if we didn’t. It’s the obstacle. Some trumpery foolish thing, I’ll answer for it.’

‘No!’ cried Lucy, stung out of self-control.

‘Then you know what it is?’ said Lawrence coolly. ‘So I supposed. Now, Miss Winyeatt, you and I have always been very good friends. You are not going to condemn me to misery?’

She had made a slip, for she had never intended to allow him to suppose that she was acquainted with Norma’s secret. But Lawrence was in no mood for small shuffling equivocations, and she dared not practise them upon him. She looked at him helplessly, and he came a step nearer.

‘Come,’ he said.

‘If I do know,’ she said, recovering herself, ‘how can you ask me to be so false? If Norma did not tell you, how can I tell you? You men believe women to have no honour!’

‘Oh, if it is a question of honour, I beg your pardon,’ he said grimly. ‘I thought—I think still—that it was only a matter of morbid scrupulousness. Just consider’—(then he changed his tone again)—‘how much there is at stake, and don’t be so stiff in your decision. The happiness of us both——’

‘No!’ she interrupted desperately.

‘No?’

‘You don’t know—you don’t know each other—you don’t know Norma——’

He laughed out.

‘I know enough. No, that’s not the trouble. It’s this hateful thing—whatever it is—which stands in the way. Will you tell me nothing about it? Is it real, is it tangible?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is it a person, then?’

‘That I did not say,’ she said helplessly.

‘You don’t deny it, though; and what thing, what abstract thing can it be? No, it’s a person—but who? Who is there who can so cruelly influence her life? I wish I had him here. The matter should be soon settled.’

As she did not answer, after a momentary pause he went on again, more coolly—

‘Miss Winyeatt, is it really impossible for you to stretch a point, and give me such a hint as might help me? You don’t know how much I have depended upon your goodness. It would be something to know what I had to fight, instead of groping in the dark, and everlastingly running my head against a wall.’

She was looking away, but she shook her head.

‘Will you tell me, then, whether you are

of the same opinion as Mrs. Winyeatt, that the obstacle is insuperable ?'

'Yes.' Her lips were so dry that it was difficult for her to frame even single words. He made a quick movement of the head—

'But not lasting? Not to go on for ever?'

'I think so.'

'Absurd, ridiculous!' he burst out angrily. 'As if I or any man should put up with a phantom barrier! I was a fool to give way as much as I did, and to make that idiotic promise.'

'What?'

'What? That I would keep away from her. I am not to go near her until she—or you—by the way, I got that small concession—she or you tell me I may come. I shouldn't have been such a fool if I hadn't believed you would have told me what there was against me.'

‘But you must keep your promise,’ she said in a strained voice.

He did not deny it, but he looked gloomily at the ground.

‘After a time,’ she added, leaning forward and speaking slowly, ‘you will forget.’

‘Do you think so?’ he asked, looking at her this time. ‘I’ve a sort of idea that Mrs. Winyeatt is not the sort of person one forgets.’

‘But what else can you do?’ It seemed as if some power were forcing her on in spite of herself.

‘Well, what I’ve got to do is to find out what you won’t tell me.’

‘You will never succeed,’ she said quickly.

‘I think I shall—in time. I can wait if waiting is necessary, and something tells me I shall succeed in the end.’

‘That,’ she said in a low passionate voice, ‘that means that you will give your life for a

dream. It is nothing more now, and it will come to no more in the end.'

'Why do you prophesy ill so persistently?' Lawrence asked, looking at her in surprise. 'You know well enough that this is no dream. It's a reality which I mean to make my own.'

She got off the boat, and stood by it, but still clung to it with one hand, as to a support.

'I think,' she said faintly, 'that I must go back now, without waiting any longer for Nelly.'

'You look very tired,' he said, struck with remorse.

'Yes, I am tired, and rather chilled. Do you know that you take a good deal out of one by your—appeals?'

'I am sorry,' he said gravely.

Her words, her attitude, indeed, throughout this conversation had disappointed and puzzled him, for he had expected active

sympathy, and eager offers of help. Instead of these, her manner had been constrained, and he could not but gather that she rather set herself to hinder than to help. He put it down to her conviction that the position of affairs was hopeless, but it surprised him that even were it so, her words had not been more friendly. He waited now for her to move, but she hesitated for a moment, and pushed a pebble with her foot.

‘I remember that not very long ago you confessed that you were obstinate,’ she said.

‘It was not very long ago, and I suppose that I haven’t lost the habit,’ he replied. ‘At any rate, I feel obstinate enough now.’

‘Yes,’ she returned bitterly; ‘that you have explained clearly.’

‘Would you have me anything else?’ he demanded in surprise. ‘You know her, know what she is, her nobility, her sweetness—tell

me honestly whether you could conceive any man fool enough to let this all slip out of his hand because some bugbear stood in the way?'

She faced him with a passionate look in her eyes.

'It is her fault—her fault!' she cried hotly. 'She should not have told you that she cared for you!'

Lawrence flushed a dull red.

'Whatever comes of it,' he said, 'she has given me the greatest honour of my life.'

It was only by an immense effort that she commanded herself.

'You must judge for yourself. Only remember that I have warned you.'

Without understanding why, Lawrence began to feel that the atmosphere was overcharged with dangerous forces, and that something must be done to break them up.

He supposed that he had been too eager, too rough in his appeal.

‘Oh, you have warned me,’ he said with a laugh, ‘and I will try to be grateful; but you must remember that it was help I wanted. There is Nelly signalling. If you will excuse me, I am going round by a farm on some business for my father.’

It was a relief to her that he went; she would have been glad if by any means she could have shaken off Nelly’s uncongenial companionship, and been left to re-arrange her rudely-scattered thoughts. The two girls exchanged brief remarks; the hill had never seemed to Lucy so steep, or the country so dreary. She longed to be alone, yet when she went into the house, instead of going upstairs she made her way at once into the study, where Mrs. Lawrence was wading through certain parish accounts. She recognised Lucy’s step.

‘Come in, my dear, come in,’ she said, without looking up; ‘have you had a nice row? It has been a beautiful afternoon.’

Lucy did not give her usual smiling answer, she walked into the room, and sank heavily into a chair.

‘Mr. Lawrence has been speaking to me,’ she began abruptly, and Mrs. Lawrence lifted her head eagerly. But one glance was enough.

‘Speaking?’ she repeated.

‘About Norma. He wishes to marry her.’

The mother’s first impulse of anger was not against the object of her son’s love, but against his silence towards her, while he confided in another.

‘He has not said so,’ she answered coldly. But Lucy was too much excited to take note of shades of expression; she went on quickly—

‘He saw her when she was at Rivermouth.

It is a miserable thing for him, because it can never be. Norma has told him so.'

'Why?' Mrs. Lawrence desired nothing less than this marriage, but she also required that all the obstacles should proceed from her side.

'I cannot tell you why,' said the girl feverishly; 'you must believe that I know. And yet he is ready to waste all his life!'

The older woman looked at her. This was the girl who she longed should be her son's wife, and yet she had never felt so little in sympathy with her as at this moment. Lucy was so desperate that she did not care to hide the smart, but Mrs. Lawrence found it hard to forgive a failure in self-respect. She pressed her lips together and the lines on her forehead became more accentuated.

'George,' she said, 'will no doubt speak to us, if it is as you imagine; and when I have heard what he has to say, I shall be better

able to judge. Are not you a little over-tired, my dear ?'

But the girl took no heed.

'Norma will not marry him,' she repeated.

'I have no desire to see her his wife,' said Mrs. Lawrence stiffly.

'But what will you do ?' Lucy leaned forward and looked eagerly at her, and Mrs. Lawrence drew herself up.

'Do ? What should I do ? I don't understand.'

Something in her tone forced itself into Lucy's preoccupied brain. She got heavily up with a poor attempt at a laugh.

'No, of course not ; of course I am talking nonsense ; only—from being Norma's sister, and—from having been here so long, I feel—an interest. Please forgive me, dear Mrs. Lawrence.'

'Forgive you, my dear !' said the other, kissing her. 'You must not take things to

heart so much. Perhaps George will think better of his unfortunate infatuation, though he is, like his father, very obstinate. I am sure you are tired. You have not got back your roses.'

'I have been a troublesome visitor, and you will be glad to get rid of me,' Lucy said languidly. 'I have fixed Thursday, if that will suit you?'

'The day after to-morrow!' Mrs. Lawrence was not only sorry but secretly pained. It shocked her to read so clearly the signs of Lucy's discomfiture, which to her thinking should have been hidden from all the world. She was ashamed to reflect that George might have read them too, and it was particularly with this fear that she urged the girl to stay, if only a few days longer.

But Lucy's was not a sensitive soul. She really cared very little whether her secret was manifest to Mrs. Lawrence or not, and all

the world might have known it if the knowing could in any way rally her flying hopes. She was at the same time profoundly discouraged. Lawrence's state of feeling had been shown too unmistakably to allow of self-deception ; more than his words, his tone, his looks had told his love for Norma. Perhaps, in old days, her vanity, which was capable of enduring a heavy strain, would have extracted some comfort out of the interview, and it was, at least, certain that she would have conducted their talk more skilfully, and have landed herself in a better position at the end. But now that her heart had taken part in the conflict she was at a disadvantage, unable to bring her forces to bear, swayed by strange and unexpected gusts, saying things which she would have given the world to have left unsaid, trembling when she should have been strong, jealous when she should have been cool. Then, though she cared nothing for her secret, she

was frightened at his resolve to find out who—what—stood between them, and she thought she should die if he succeeded, and faced her with the knowledge. In fact she only kept her head sufficiently to know that there was no use in her staying where he was—at present.

She was, therefore, keenly desirous to be gone. It was true that she had not regained her health, and she laid some of her sensations on the soft and yielding air. If she were at a distance, she could make her plans with a cooler head, and see whether it were possible in any degree to retrieve her position, or whether she could only act as a separating force. No alternative line of action presented itself.

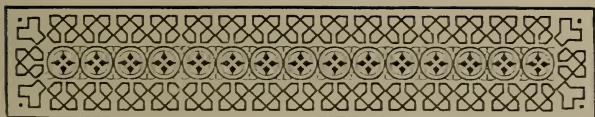
She told Mrs. Lawrence that her plans were fixed, though in truth they were simply dependent upon her own will, and had scarcely taken definite shape. She had given

up all thought of remaining in Devonshire, from a vague consciousness that if she were within reach of Lawrence and yet he did not come to see her, the pain would be less endurable than if there were a solid reason, in the form of distance, to account for his non-appearance. Lucy still found it impossible to face the truth ; although a new keenness of vision had flashed upon her, she wanted to dress it up, to disguise its harsh aspect with pleasant pretences. More than this, in the midst of real suffering her pleasure-loving nature was looking round for something which might serve as compensation—at any rate, in some degree restore the balance. She caught at the sense of power, and felt triumph in the knowledge that it was she who stood between Lawrence and Norma ; she might count for nothing to him, but if that was scarcely conceivable, it was unquestionable that he was absolutely at her mercy. He was

causing her a suffering which had struck her unawares, but he was suffering himself, and she passionately protested that this was but justice.

Yet—there were other cries within her. She had allowed her conscience to become one-sided, but it was sufficiently alive to prove uneasy, and the outward observances to which she had been faithful had the effect of keeping a divine standard before her eyes. She could not ignore it. She could resolve to separate these two; she would never be able to do it with a light heart. Already a certain look which she had seen in Lawrence's eyes, haunted her, and love had opened her eyes to what it meant.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

Then she took up her burden of life again,
Saying only 'It might have been !'—WHITTIER.



WHEN Norma came back to her home, Miss Ellison's shrewd observation was conscious of a change. Of late she had been restless, and often absent-minded. She never chose to appear unoccupied, but her friend had more than once noticed that her work fell upon her lap, or her book remained open at the same page, while her thoughts were evidently far from book or work. She had been restless also, and soon wearied of one occupation ; it had seemed as if some restraining curb had been removed.

But, if this were so, it was now clear that it was back again. There was something, indeed, almost pathetic to the watcher in the intensity with which Norma flung herself into small and trivial things. Whatever had to be done was done to the uttermost, for she spared neither toil nor time. No more day-dreams—not so much as a pause into which they might steal. She taught Agnes German, working hard at it herself between whiles. Either Janet Somerville or Miss Ellison were always with her. ‘She is driving away thought and regrets, because she knows that if she gave way to them they would paralyze her,’ commented Miss Ellison sorrowfully. ‘The question is if they won’t revenge themselves one of these days, the harpies!’ But Miss Ellison, if she guessed, knew nothing. She had heard of Mr. Lawrence’s visit, she could not tell whether he had succeeded afterwards in his quest; if he had, it was pretty plain that nothing good had

come of it. Norma had shown by one or two significant silences that she had nothing to tell even her dearest friend, and Miss Ellison, though she was dying to know, held her peace like a wise woman.

Lucy was in London, her old governess with her, and she said she liked the life ; at any rate, her health appeared to be re-established. Norma had seen her once or twice, but not alone ; she had always taken Isabel or Janet Somerville with her. And though her heart hungered for news of Lawrence, she never allowed herself to ask.

Suddenly one day there came a letter. When she saw whose it was, her heart beat violently, and the room swam ; only by a violent effort could she regain her self-control. And then a tempest seized her. She was sure that she ought not to read it, but all the time her fingers were stealing into the envelope, softly drawing it out—the next moment she

was kissing it with the pent-up passion of her heart. At first she did not attempt to read it, the mere fact of having it there was sweet enough. It was full of the promise of joy, and she let her eyes fall, now here, now there, upon different words, unconnected, but *his*. Then the pang seized her again; she began to feel that she was failing in her renunciation, and the fear troubled her conscience, though she did not feel that she could refrain from reading. It was too short, but one sheet, and in his bold and strong handwriting, too soon read; and yet, as her woman's heart drank in the words, she would not have had them other than they were; they seemed to fill up, and satisfy the aching void of months. 'Why should I not write?' he said. 'Even if you toss me into the fire, I am no worse off; better, indeed, for the very fact of writing seems to break that horrible blank silence in which I have existed—how many ages? Unless you are the

cruellest woman that ever lived, you will let me now and then—only now and then—send you a word.’ He went on to tell her that his father had had a very long and serious attack of rheumatic fever, from which he was only now slowly recovering ; and it had been impossible for his son to leave the rectory. ‘All this time,’ he added, ‘I have lived in miserable suspense, unable to attempt anything towards solving the enigma you left with me. But I shall do it yet unless the mud and the moisture get the upper hand completely. Norma, isn’t it time to tell me I may come?’

When she had read this letter she cried a good deal, and kissed it again and again. She was angry with him that he should think she could be so heartless as to toss it into the fire, and she was angry with herself for her hardness in not answering it. If only she could have sat down and poured out her soul to him, said no more than ‘Dear, I love you,’ over and

over again! But to be stirred to the heart by such an appeal, to feel all her nerves tingling with the exquisite delight of it, and to have not a word to utter in return—this was too cruel, too dreary! this made her feel as if she must herself be to blame, as if the insupportable state of things should never have been permitted to exist.

But the letter gave her joy, and at the end of a fortnight another came to her. Lawrence said that his father was sufficiently recovered for him to be able to leave him, and that he should soon find himself in London. It implied that he had his reasons for going there, and he asked again whether she would not let him see her. ‘Don’t be uneasy, however,’ he said; ‘don’t fear that I am going to persecute you—you see I haven’t forgotten your word. I have your promise, and you are not the woman to fail one.’

After receiving this letter, Norma pondered

on it for a day, and then wrote to Lucy. Since their interview at the rectory, George Lawrence had not once been mentioned between them, and it cost Norma not a little to be the one to break the silence. But she felt that if she kept his letters from Lucy's knowledge, she would be acting deceitfully—at any rate, not with perfect frankness. She could not bring herself to use many words, she merely said, 'I wish you to know that Mr. Lawrence has written twice lately,' and there was an end of it. Lucy wrote back an affectionate letter, at the close of which she said, 'Thank you for telling me about Mr. Lawrence,' and no more.

Perhaps Norma had expected, had hoped for something more, for touches of the old restlessness came back. She could not tell how to act. These letters of Lawrence's, delicious as they were, kept the pain always fresh, and she knew that she was always expecting or

dwelling upon them. Yet to write to him meant to open the gate which she felt required all her strength to keep shut ; were it only a few words it was certain he would make it count for a great deal, a great deal which she had no right to offer. Nothing was so blighting, so chilling, as silence—nothing cost her so much, and therefore to poor Norma it seemed right. She would give him no answer, and perhaps his letters would die away ; if they showed no sign of this, she must ask Miss Ellison to write and desire him to stop them.

Meanwhile he would be in London and would see Lucy.

Miss Ellison came in one late February afternoon, and found Janet playing *reversi* with Agnes, who had a cold. So had Norma, and Miss Ellison exclaimed at her imprudence when she found that she had not come in.

‘It is much too cold for her,’ she said ;

‘the wind has gone towards the north, and I believe we shall be having more snow.’

‘Is it really north? I thought this afternoon was so pleasant,’ said the girl.

‘Oh, it is north, depend upon it! I have reached the age when one becomes a connoisseur in winds. I shall soon dispute his empire with old General Lee, who has ruled you all so long. But I wish Norma would not be so imprudent.’ She walked to the window and looked out. A grey sea heaved sullenly before her, few ships were to be seen, but far out a steamer was moving slowly, her wake contracted into one sharp spot of white. As she looked, Norma crossed the road, opened the little gate and came into the garden. Miss Ellison was sure she was both tired and pale, and when she had reached the room in which they were, she was more impressed by her looks. Agnes ran to kiss her, and she brightened when she saw her friends.

‘I had a hope I might find you here, otherwise I think I should have gone to your house.’

‘Oh, you are imprudent enough for anything! Do you want to kill yourself? You look like a ghost,’ said Miss Ellison severely.

Mrs. Winyeatt smiled, and let her heavy fur-bordered coat drop from her.

‘Don’t be tragic, Mary,’ she said; ‘I want nothing but my tea, and to keep you to dinner.’

‘I ought not to stay. I ought to spend this evening in writing letters. I am dreadfully behindhand; there were dozens of things to be done before March, but the fact is that February is such a shabby little month, there is no turning round in it. However, I forgive it; indeed, I always feel grateful to my ancestors.’

‘Why?’ asked Janet.

‘Why? For their thoughtfulness, to be

sure. Have you ever reflected what it would have been if they had equalised matters by making May or June the shortest month in the year? Now, on the whole, one is glad to have done with February, and even Janet, who likes everything, and has something good to say for the best-abused men and matters——'

'I am sure I am not half so kind!'

'Ah, well, perhaps we are robbing you of some of your innocent appreciation—but I heard even Janet whispering to Norma that she wished March were come.'

'But—oh, that was'—blushing furiously—'that was—because——'

'Never mind what it was,' said Mrs. Winyeatt, advancing to the rescue. 'Mary has nothing to do with your whispers to me, my Janet. Has nobody ordered tea? I am longing to shut out that grey sky, and to settle down for a comfortable evening, and poor

Agnes is pining to go on with her game. I hope you have thanked Janet for being so kind as to play, Agnes?’

‘Oh, she likes it!’ said the little girl calmly, arranging the counters.

‘Yes, she likes it, of course—it’s astonishing how many things she likes to do for us all,’ said Miss Ellison, nodding kindly at the girl as she came and stood by the table. ‘Did you see the regiments march down to the pier, this afternoon, to receive the Grand Duke?’

‘Isabel saw it. Papa took Isabel, and they had capital places. Isabel came afterwards to tell me about it. Ah, here is the tea!’—jumping up. ‘Now, dear Mrs. Winyeatt, you are to sit still, and let me pour it out. I won’t forget about the water for the second cups, I promise you. I do think I am improving in my tea-making.’

‘Janet,’ said Mrs. Winyeatt suddenly, ‘I

have something to tell you which you will very much like to hear. I was calling at the Carringtons, and Colonel Clarke happened to be there, and I asked him what he thought of Mr. Rose—as an *officer*, you understand,’ she hastened to add, with a smile. ‘He thinks very well indeed of him. He says he is clever and sound-headed—sound-headed, that was the word, for it struck me—and sure to get on in his profession. He really spoke very warmly. It would have made you feel immensely proud. And I told him how glad I was, and that I was very much interested in Mr. Rose’s career. I think if he can ever do him a good turn, he will.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Winyeatt, how kind, how dear of you! Colonel Clarke is the person he thinks so much about! Oh, it will be delightful to write this to him, and to tell papa and everyone! Papa is so afraid we should be too sanguine, he is always telling me that the

army is the worst profession in the world, and that Arthur will be an old man before he has any chance of distinguishing himself. But people do get on, you know,' added Janet thoughtfully, dropping two lumps of sugar into the tea-pot. 'And though papa thinks he is too shy, yet—he isn't shy when you know him, is he? It is only just at first. *I* never found it out. Oh, Miss Ellison, what have I been doing!'

'Never mind, my dear. I have extracted the sugar from the tea-pot. Norma had no business to introduce such absorbing topics when you had other things to do.'

'Oh, it was too good of her!'

'Well, then, Norma, have you nothing else for any of us? Haven't you something nice in your budget for me or for Agnes?'

'Not for you.'

'Then Agnes. Agnes, bring me some

bread and butter, and find out what your mother has still to reveal.'

'To tell the truth, there is something.'

'Oh,' cried Agnes rapturously, 'what?'

'I had a letter from Aunt Bessie to-day, and she wants us both to go and see her. Would you like it?'

'Oh!' There was no doubt what the oh! meant.

'You would? So I thought, and I believe we had better go.'

'When, when, when? Would Miss Fox go? Should I have a holiday? Is Madge nice?'—hugging her mother.

'I really think it would be the best thing for you,' said Miss Ellison, looking at her friend's pale face. 'It will be cold, but you don't mind cold; and now that Lucy has set up for herself, you are free to take an occasional run. Why don't you spend a few days with Lucy as you pass through London?'

‘Oh, no!’ said Norma hastily. ‘No, I should go direct to Scotland.’

‘Isabel heard from Lucy this morning,’ remarked Janet. ‘She has had neuralgia. She doesn’t seem quite so strong as she used to be; I don’t think she has quite recovered that sad shock at the Lawrences.’

‘I don’t know about shocks,’ said the unfair Miss Ellison, ‘but I dare say Lucy fretted herself ill about something.’

Then Scotland came up again, and provided ample materials for conversation, for Janet—with a few intervals of dreaming over Colonel Clarke’s prophecies, which she supplemented and enlarged upon in her own hopeful mind, until their author would have failed to recognise his own utterances—Janet was very much interested in little Lady Drummond, and had almost as many questions as Agnes to ask about them all, and Miss Ellison, who was puzzled to know what had happened in the

autumn, and only sorrowfully aware that things had gone wrong or come to a deadlock or something, talked also with the hope of finding out that Norma was really taking an interest in this sudden move of hers.

Norma herself was conscious that she was giving way to the impulse of flight. She was afraid that Lawrence, if he did not actually break his promise, would find some means of evading its strict bonds. He would be so near her in London! He would not come to the house, but she might meet him in the streets or at her friends', never would she feel rid of the haunting possibility; more than that, she knew that all the time this would be her yearning hope.

It did not seem to her that she could bear either the seeing or the not seeing him.

She was ashamed of her weakness, but she made no attempt to disguise it from herself, and when Bessie's invitation came she felt that

it opened a way out of some of her difficulties, and would not allow herself to hesitate about accepting it.

So the next day's post carried a letter to Lady Drummond, saying that in a few days she and Agnes would be with her ; and though Miss Ellison cried out at the shortness of the time allowed for preparations, Norma was glad to have all her hours so occupied that she could keep invading thoughts at bay. She was fairly successful, and she flattered herself that once in a place into which no possible associations could creep, a home full of healthful and vigorous interests, she would gain the mastery over what she had to own was now sometimes apt to master her.

Only one outside thing troubled her. Polly Medland had benefited wonderfully at the Home ; it was even thought that she might leave it, but as a dry climate was pronounced necessary, Mrs. Winyeatt had arranged to take

her. In this dilemma Miss Ellison came to the rescue, promising to fetch the girl and take her to her house. So that everything seemed provided for, and Norma wrote to her sister to tell her that she was almost on the wing.

She wrote also to Lucy. Her sense of honour was perhaps overstrained, for she could not endure that Lucy should accuse her of concealment of plan. And, moreover, she believed that Lawrence was in London, and she wished if she were to see Lucy that the proposal should come from her sister-in-law, though she could not but doubt whether, under these circumstances, it would come at all. And she was right, for it did not. Lucy answered expressing much delight that she had made up her mind to such a pleasant change, wrote a very charming and amusing letter, and said nothing about seeing her on her way.

So Norma, Agnes, and Chambers started, and made their first halting-place at York, going on the next day to Edinburgh. After that they had still a long journey, for Craigmuir was north of Blair Athol, but Mrs. Winyeatt, who had expected cold, was surprised at the moderate and open weather. So far, indeed, the winter in Scotland had been singularly mild, and though the country looked bare there was a beautiful brown colouring spread over it, sombre but rich, and more attractive than the greens and yellows of summer. Norma breathed more freely as the train flew north. Bessie was, after all, her own sister ; she was glad to go to her ; glad to leave behind her, as she hoped, much that was perplexing and dreary ; glad to be freed from some fears.

Or so she imagined.



CHAPTER XXIX.

When she would think, where'er she turned her sight,
The airy hand confusion wrought,
Wrote 'Mene, mene,' and divided quite
The kingdom of her thought.—TENNYSON.



LAWRENCE arrived in London on a day of unrelieved gloom, cold, with a sleety rain falling, and the only gleams of brightness those which came from wet roofs, wet waterproofs or shiny tarpaulins. He himself looked thinner and less cheery than of old. The winter had been long and trying. The rector's illness had been not only serious but full of suffering, and he could not patiently endure the long confine-

ment, so greatly opposed to his usual active habits. Then he became low-spirited, dwelling much upon his brother-in-law's death, and holding his own carelessness accountable for it. Mrs. Lawrence was at her wits' end, Nelly was quite unused to illness, and the greater part of the nursing and cheering fell upon George. It was impossible for him to leave the rectory, and he thought bitterly of the futility of his determination to get to the root of this thing which stood between him and Norma. He had wearied himself with guesses. From his mother he met with no help. The two letters he had written had been a relief—nothing more. Now he had come to London with a desperate determination to be no longer baffled.

Ever since that day by the river-side his thoughts of Lucy had been less assured, less friendly than before; for he could not be unconscious that she was trying to shake his

determination to win his love ; and if, as he sometimes told himself, this was only because she knew how little chance there was of his succeeding, there had yet been something unusual in her words and manner, something which was certainly not sympathy with his disappointment. But he still clung to the belief that it was from Lucy he should get his clue, and he lost no time in going to her.

Lucy was not unprepared, for she had heard of his expected coming from Mrs. Lawrence, who frequently wrote. It was true that the mother had been both startled and displeased by the girl's loss of self-control, but she was really fond of her ; and, after all, were there not excuses to be made for a motherless girl, not very happy in her home ? During the rector's illness she had often wished for someone more capable than Nelly ; she saw the worried lines on her son's face, and felt

that things were wrong, and that she could clearly tell how they might be straightened again ; therefore, it was with the best wishes in the world that she packed a hamper of country produce, vegetables and flowers, butter and cream, and despatched it by George, with strict injunctions to deliver it to Lucy no later than the next day.

The girl had passed a restless and unhappy winter.

That inconvenient conscience of hers, to which on certain points she attended, had, therefore, sufficient vitality to raise its head and protest on those other points in which she did her best to smother it. If it did nothing else, it succeeded in making her uncomfortable.

Yet, after all, she reflected, fortune had been on her side. The rector's illness had stopped Lawrence in his researches ; time, she might hope, had perhaps in some measure

effaced Norma's image, and her vanity was beginning to paint charming possibilities when she heard of his letters. Closely upon this came the warning of his coming, and of Norma's journey to Scotland.

She could not but own that Norma had behaved with all the loyalty which she had expected from her, and her winter with her old governess had taught her something of her charms as a companion. She sometimes wondered why Norma had yielded to her, and explained it by two reasons; one, that her sister-in-law's love was not strong enough to make the renunciation actual suffering, and the other, that in old days Norma had behaved ill to Paul, and felt compensation due to her—Paul's sister.

But now he was coming, he was coming ! What preparations she made ! How carefully she planned Miss Sullivan's absence ! How eagerly she rehearsed all she would say ! The

false step she had made that afternoon by the river should not be repeated, he should turn to her for friendship and for sympathy again. All her pretty things were so cleverly disposed, her tulips and hyacinths were so bright that her room looked a nest of colour; all that was wanted was the sun, and lo! out came the sun as if in answer. When Lawrence appeared he exclaimed at the prettiness of it all, and felt again the old contrast between Lucy, neat and well-dressed, and Nelly's careless disregard for appearances. The girl, too, had a soft deprecating air about her which was new, and which touched him. He began to think he had been dwelling on a false impression.

‘How good of you to find me out so soon!’ she exclaimed. ‘I wanted so much to see you, and to hear about this dreadful time you have all had. Is dear Mr. Lawrence really better? It must have been such a painful

illness, and I assure you my thoughts have been constantly at the rectory.'

'That was kind of you,' said Lawrence cordially. 'Things are mending daily now, or I couldn't have got away. I suspect my father was more shaken by all that happened when you were with us than we realised. Then came a chill, and his usual imprudence,' he added smiling, 'this time was not successful. Are you well?'

'Quite,' said Lucy with a thrill.

'And do you like London?'

'It has been better for me this winter. It is warmer than Dover, but of course all this'—looking about her—'is not so pleasant.'

'No,' Lawrence agreed; 'it would not be so pleasant.' He paused for a moment, and then said abruptly—'Miss Winyeatt, do you remember our last conversation?'

'Yes,' she said frankly. 'And to tell you

the truth, I have often been sorry to remember, because I don't think you were very well pleased with it. I think you fancied that I was—well, a little chilling?'

'Weren't you?' he asked smiling.

'Yes, I was—I certainly was. I don't want to deny it. Only when one sees one's friends taking a road which can only end in disappointment, please, what is one to do? Encourage them in it with enthusiasm?'

She looked at him very appealingly as she said this, and Lawrence instantly forgave her.

'I dare say that I was unjust, that I didn't put myself in your place,' he owned. 'But you must remember that I assured you that nothing you or anyone else could say would turn me from that road, and that all I asked was not to be obliged to travel blindfold.'

'Ah,' she said, 'but am I the person to remove the bandage?'

‘I believe you could,’ said Lawrence quietly.

Lucy darted a swift look at him, but nothing in his face hinted that this was a charge.

‘If you hope that, you expect too much,’ she returned. ‘*I* can never tell you, and I am pretty sure you will never know. Now you will be angry with me again. Oh, why, why can’t we let this alone, and speak of something else!’

He was once more touched with what seemed like a girlish dread of hurting him. He leaned forward and spoke very kindly.

‘I should be a brute to be angry. Perhaps you think I am a brute already to bother you with my troubles directly we meet. I haven’t much to say in excuse, except that it all means such a lot to me. If you knew what a dreary winter this has been! And a little hope would have made all the difference. If it had been

only waiting—waiting ever so many years—some limit given—anything but this dreary black curtain let down between us. And if it exists,' he went on more vehemently, 'if it has a right to exist, which, mind you, I don't believe, why am I to be shut out of sight of her for ever? What's to prevent my, at least, seeing and hearing her, like any other man?'

Lucy was staring at him startled. 'Oh, no!' she exclaimed.

'Oh, no? Why oh, no? What is there against it?'

She recovered herself.

'I only meant that I was sure Norma would not consent.'

'You are as hard as she is,' he said gloomily. 'No—forgive me, I have no right to blame you for my misfortunes.'

But some expression in his eyes, some troubled lines about his firm mouth, moved inconsistent Lucy to a sudden poignant pity.

She had never pitied Norma, because she judged her by herself, but Lawrence she had idealised, and it was not so impossible for her to realise that he was suffering. And yet with the pity there mingled a strange satisfaction. It was she who held the cords in her hand, she who was influencing his life. She felt as if this possession were a sort of compensation for what she could not get. Presently he went on—

‘Where is she now?’

‘She is on her way to Scotland.’ Lucy did not think it necessary to mention that she had passed through London that day.

‘To Scotland! Why?’

‘To stay with her sister. Don’t you remember that Bessie Drummond lives in Scotland?’

‘Yes, I remember. By the way,’ hopefully, ‘I wonder whether she could throw a light on this business?’

‘No,’ said Lucy quickly; ‘I am sure she

cannot.' Then fearing lest she might again alienate him, she added, 'But you might try.'

'Yes, of course I might. I was a fool not to have thought of her before,' he said with rising spirits. 'I might run down and see her.'

Lucy shook her head.

'You will do no good if you follow Norma.'

He got up impatiently, and stood with his back to the fire.

'Something meets one whichever way one turns,' he said. 'However, I suppose you are right. I must wait. But I'll be down there before Norma has been a day at home.'

She winced. She had never heard the name slip from him before.

'Then if I'm to be barred from Scotland, I shall go to Dover, and see Miss Ellison. What! wrong again?'

'Oh, no,' said Lucy, a little sullenly. 'Do

as you like, of course. Only if you come to me for advice, you mustn't be vexed when it does not always agree with your own opinions.'

'You are right,' said Lawrence with an effort, 'but—forgive me—you don't offer me any advice which is not negative.'

She paused for a moment—it was indeed hard for her to speak.

'Ah,' she said in a low voice, 'you wouldn't like my advice.'

'Try.'

'If Norma will not marry you, would it not be wise to—give her up?'

'Tell me why she will not marry me,' said Lawrence, fixing his eyes keenly upon her, 'and I will give you an answer.'

Lucy allowed him to fancy that there was a certain hesitation in her answer.

'Why do women generally refuse to marry?'

'Because they don't care enough about the man who asks them,' he said, with a confident

laugh. The next moment his face changed—
'You don't think it's that?'

'Perhaps her love is not—very deep.'

He looked at her.

'Yes, it is,' he asserted slowly. 'As deep and as true as her heart. Whatever failure there comes in this it will not be in her truth. If that is all you have to suggest, Miss Winyeatt, you can't know the actual reason one bit better than I do myself.'

'Oh yes, I do!' she cried, piqued.

'Perhaps you could remove it?'

Lawrence was appalled at the effect of his words, for Lucy turned pale and the tears rushed into her eyes. He had spoken on the impulse of the moment, and without real suspicion, and he hastened to smooth his speech away by all the kind things he could think of. Lucy at last permitted herself to be soothed, and to smile at her own susceptibility. To turn the subject, she spoke of the rectory,

the village, and Toby, and Lawrence soon rose to go.

‘I shall see you again?’ asked the girl.

‘When I come back from Dover.’

‘Don’t take it for granted that all which Miss Ellison guesses is the right explanation,’ she said hastily.

‘I shall be thankful for even a guess,’ Lawrence had answered, and then he was gone, and Lucy’s maid came to the door with a bundle of Lent lilies which had been unpacked from Mrs. Lawrence’s hamper. Lucy told her to put them in water, while she herself ran up to her bedroom, flung herself on the sofa, turned her face to the pillow, and cried bitterly.

Lawrence carried out his determination the next day. He telegraphed to Miss Ellison, had her answer, and went down, in spite of a violent storm of wind and snow. His spirits had somewhat risen after his visit to Lucy, for that suggestion of hers was so far from

what he knew to be the truth, that he began to doubt whether she really knew anything about the bar which she pronounced to be hopeless. Moreover, he was a good deal puzzled by her emotion at the remark he had hazarded without thinking much of his words, and in his wonder his thoughts wandered near the truth, although they never actually fastened upon it. He began to think that it was not impossible that Norma, in some rush of self-abnegation, had promised not to marry, but to keep a home for Paul's sister.

Miss Ellison's greeting was very hearty. She had long been dying to know what had put an end to all the hopes and fears which had sprung up during those summer weeks. Norma had confided in her for a time, then had drawn back into an impenetrable silence. She had suffered, of that her friend was sure, but it had seemed the kindest thing, since it was so unquestionably her wish, to

leave her alone. But here was Lawrence offering himself up for a prey, and she would have been less than woman not to jump at him ; and if she did not know beforehand how to greet him, whether he would appear as sad, sorry, or triumphant, the man who was ready to marry Lucy, or the man who was faithful to Norma, or the man who had forsaken both—the moment she saw him she forgot all about her doubts, and was ready to swear to his honesty. He looked into her eyes as they shook hands, and saw there what made him speak at once.

‘I have come to ask your help.’

Happy Miss Ellison !

‘You shall have all that I can give you,’ she said smiling.

And then she made him draw his chair near the fire, and shut out the turbulent snow, which was filling the air with mad gambols, and to make it more easy for him, asked him

whether he knew that Mrs. Winyeatt was in Scotland?

Yes, it appeared that he knew this, and that it had been told him by Miss Winyeatt.

By Lucy? Miss Ellison's suspicions began to revive, but she clung bravely to her confidence in his face.

'I am afraid,' she went on, 'that they may have a cold journey, although it was so fine when they started yesterday.'

'Yesterday!' he exclaimed. 'Only yesterday!'

'Yesterday only. Did not Lucy tell you?'

It struck him also as strange. It might have been a chance omission, but it looked almost as if she had not cared to let him know how near Norma had been. This, however, had nothing to do with the object of his visit.

'Look here, Miss Ellison,' he said, 'I have come on purpose to talk to you, and to see if you can throw light upon a matter very near

to me. I came when I knew that Norma was away—I may call her Norma, mayn't I ?'

'Ah, may you ?'—with a smile.

'Yes, to you. I couldn't have come when she was here. Do you know why ?'

'No, indeed.'

'Do you know anything ?'

'On the whole I should say I didn't. Since Norma came back from Devonshire she has said nothing to me, and I have been reduced to guessing, which is poor work when one is a good deal interested. Did you see her when she was there ? I fancied you were not at home.'

'I heard she had gone down, and I followed her ; you may guess why. It was to ask her to be my wife.'

'And she refused ?'

'And she refused.'

'But—but then, what am I to do ?' demanded Miss Ellison breathlessly.

‘ Help me to know why she refused. She would have married me if it had only rested with her own feelings. She let me have that much consolation.’

‘ That was a great deal from Norma,’ said the other gravely.

‘ A great deal—Heaven bless her ! It’s what I have fed upon ever since. But it won’t last for ever. Miss Ellison, what is this something which stands in the way ? ’

‘ Lucy, Lucy, that wretched Lucy ! ’ was what Miss Ellison was saying in her heart. But she could not breathe it openly, she could only fall back upon futile suggestions which she knew to be so false that she was ashamed to utter them. ‘ Perhaps she will not marry again ? ’

‘ That is not the obstacle.’

‘ Oh, I do so wish I could help you ! ’ she cried desperately. ‘ But I can’t. I know nothing, and if I guess at anything, my lips

are sealed ; only, if I were you, I would *not* give up, I would go on !'

His eyes kindled. 'You're the first to say anything sensible. Of course I shall persist, though Norma and Miss Winyeatt both vow that it is useless.'

'Lucy ! Does Lucy say so ?' There was hot indignation in her tone.

'Yes, she does.' He leaned forward and watched her. 'Miss Ellison, I have sometimes wondered, though it doesn't seem possible, whether Miss Winyeatt has anything to do with it ?'

Miss Ellison was silent, but her face could not help being expressive.

'It struck me that Norma might have made some promise, some agreement not to marry while she required a home ? It's preposterous, because if that were all, she might have fifty homes with us ; besides, I can't conceive Miss Winyeatt having the barbarity to

hold her to it—no, it's absolutely preposterous; but then—so is the whole affair.'

His listener still remained obstinately silent.

'Well,' he said after waiting. 'You must let me hear your opinion.'

'I can't do that,' she said at last. 'I will help you in every possible way, write to Norma, scold her, anything; but I don't mean to hint at my own fancies, because I can't prove them. Only, don't despair.'

He caught her hand and shook it warmly. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Then will you write, and point out that if anything of that sort, anything relating to Miss Winyeatt, is at the bottom of this detestable difficulty, it might all be arranged with the greatest ease—that Miss Winyeatt might stay with us for ever, if that's all.'

'Oh, good Heavens!' groaned Miss Ellison mentally

‘ Say anything, promise anything,’ he went on with great eagerness; ‘ I know you have immense influence with Norma. And—can’t I do something? Can’t I appeal to Miss Winyeatt?’

‘ Oh, I don’t know, I don’t really know!’ she cried, lifting her hands; ‘ I never pretend to understand Lucy.’

He pondered again. ‘ I think, though you won’t allow it in so many words, that you believe she has something to do with the complication.’

‘ Yes, I do,’ she said desperately. ‘ I suppose it’s a dreadful thing to say, but I do.’

‘ It can’t do any harm,’ he replied quite innocently; ‘ of course, it’s all some foolish cobweb, which might be swept away, if only one was permitted to look at it. Though I confess I always thought Miss Winyeatt was the one to befriend me until——’

‘ Until when?’

‘ Until a talk I had with her soon after I had spoken to Norma. Then I fancied she was not very keen. And again yesterday. I suppose a woman’s dislike to lose a home is something we men can’t fathom. Yet, it’s odd—she’s out of it now,’ he added with a laugh.

Miss Ellison looked at him helplessly, with, it must be owned, some contempt for man’s want of perception mingled with her liking. If he had guessed she would have hated him, but she thought that in his place she must quickly have arrived at the missing reason.

After this they talked a great deal, but she was on her guard, and would not be betrayed into further imprudences, unless giving Lawrence all the encouragement she could think of came under that heading ; and she was so hearty in her good wishes, so hopeful in her prophecies, that her listener had not

felt so happy for many a long day. His gratitude was proportionably great.

‘I shall never, never forget it!’ he exclaimed when he thanked her for her kindness. ‘I wasn’t quite certain when I came whether you would befriend me.’

‘Oh, yes,’ she nodded; ‘I have always been on your side. I think every man ought to marry, and very few women; but Norma is one of those who would be happier as a wife.’

And it may be noticed that this remarkable expression of opinion appeared so perfectly satisfactory to her hearer that he agreed to it without a demur.

When he left it was with the understanding that Miss Ellison should write to Norma, mention his visit and his confidence, allude frankly to her own ideas as to the real author of the difficulty, and urge all the arguments in her power. He was very desirous to be

allowed to go north himself, to see Lady Drummond only, as he very carefully explained. But his counsellor would not hear of it.

‘Norma is not the woman to be persuaded against her conscience,’ she said emphatically. ‘And to tell you the truth, I don’t expect my own appeal will be of much service. But perhaps I can speak with some knowledge, and Bessie Drummond can’t, and so you had better leave me alone for the present.’

‘More waiting!’ said Lawrence ruefully. ‘But I won’t be ungrateful. You shall go your own way.’

‘I will have my turn, at any rate,’ she said with a foretaste of satisfaction.

‘And what am I to do?’

‘Study Lucy—no—no, I don’t know—keep away from her, I believe. I have told you already that I don’t pretend to understand Lucy.’

This was not very helpful, but Lawrence's spirits had been raised by the interview. Miss Ellison insisted upon his seeing Polly Medland before he left—Norma's pet care, as she called her; and, indeed, the change in the girl was so great that it was difficult to believe she was the same. It seemed she did not wish to go back to Marlham, not even to see Ida Coombes, and if her grandparents agreed, Mrs. Winyeatt had promised to take her into her own house for training.

When he was back in London, Lawrence determined not to go to Miss Winyeatt until he had heard from Miss Ellison. Neither of his last talks with her had been satisfactory; indeed, now, more than ever, he had to allow that she had shown herself decidedly adverse, and he felt a good deal of anger at the idea that here, after all, lay the root of their troubles. If she had not professed friendship! If she had not given her advice under the

cloak of goodwill! But this he could not forgive.

He waited, therefore, with impatience, and he had to wait longer than would otherwise have been the case, because of some accident and delay to a mail train. It was a week and a day after Norma had started, and within a fortnight of the time she had fixed for her return, when he received his letter from Miss Ellison. She wrote with evident disappointment. Norma, she said, had told her nothing, would tell her nothing, had only reiterated her words to Lawrence, that it was impossible, and that she could give no reason. It was best for him to forget her—it would be cruel in him to attempt even indirectly to see her. ‘I don’t agree with her about the forgetting,’ said Miss Ellison, ‘but I suppose you must not try to get sight of her yet, so don’t go to Scotland till she comes back. Don’t despair, don’t give up, don’t be cross. You see, like


other advisers, my counsel chiefly consists of what you are not to do. Never mind. Some day it will be the turn of the Do's—(I don't know how to spell it). Good-bye.'





CHAPTER XXX.

Let Love but once gain footing within, and even Vanity may have to fly out of the window.

‘HAT do you think of Norma, Robert?’ demanded Lady Drummond on the night of her sister’s arrival.

‘That she’s just handsomer than ever, and that it’s a thousand pities she’s never married again.’

‘Well, I don’t know. She’s got Agnes, and a comfortable fortune; and if Lucy Winyeatt continues to take herself off, I think she might do very well. As our children grow up, of course they can go and stay

with her. She can then always have cheerful society.'

'Chatter and row enough!'

'You know, Robert, that you are always miserable unless they *are* chattering, as you call it. You encourage them in every tom-boy trick. Miss Anderson says that when you are near it is hopeless for her to attempt to keep them in order.'

'Confound Miss Anderson,' growled Sir Robert sleepily.

'However, I would rather there was too much spirit than too little,' Lady Drummond pursued unheeding. 'Yes, Norma is splendidly beautiful. I see a strong likeness in Madge to her aunt.'

'In Madge! In Madge, with her little snub nose!'

'You are always saying something against Madge's nose,' protested his wife in a vexed tone. 'You might be more civil to it, when

you reflect that it comes from your side of the house. *We* never had anything like it.'

To this Sir Robert muttered something incoherent, and the conversation dropped.

Though a boisterous March is not the most inviting weather for Scotland, Scotch hospitality is indifferent to seasons, and Craigmuir generally had its guests and its coming and going. Now there were a Mr. and Mrs. Walter Tyrrell, a Miss Mainwaring and a young Jack Drummond, in the Foreign Office, a cousin of Sir Robert's. They were all, in their way, pleasant people, they all liked Norma, and Jack Drummond promptly tumbled head over ears in love with her. If she could have got rid of those haunting longings, which Lawrence's letters and the knowledge of his being in London had made more persistent and less shadowy, Norma would have enjoyed her life; as it was, she was glad to have come, glad to see Bessie in

her home life, with husband and children, sensible, useful ; glad that Agnes should be so frankly and unreservedly happy.

Bessie herself was delighted to have her sister, the more so as she always considered that Norma stood in need of practical advice on many points, and was convinced that it was her mission to instil it. She was proud of her, too—proud of her extreme beauty and charm ; she was even proud of Jack Drummond's half-comical infatuation, although she scoffed at him to his face for its foolishness. But because he was too young, there was no reason why someone of maturer age should not be provided, and she had a dinner-party, and flattered herself that she had got together exactly the right people. But though, as usual, one or two were attracted by the beautiful Mrs. Winyeatt, it was provokingly evident that she, on her part, felt only the profoundest unconcern, and when Bessie overheard her

making some laughing allusion to her age, she felt that it was time for her to speak. The next morning, when Lady Drummond was answering notes in her own room, came Norma and the opportunity.

‘You must let me in, Bessie, however busy you are. The Tyrrells have gone out by themselves on an expedition to the Glen, and Miss Mainwaring and Mr. Drummond are riding with Sir Robert; and the young people all being provided for, I betook myself to you.’

Here was Lady Drummond’s opportunity.

‘The young people? My dear, we are all young.’

‘I know. All but me. I’m the eldest, and I feel like a grandmother.’

‘I wanted to speak to you about that. You’re thirty-three, an age at which a woman is still quite young, and you talk as if you were twenty years older. It really is too absurd; and, besides, it’s not kind to Maud Mainwaring.’

‘What has she to do with it?’

‘She’s two years older, that’s all.’

‘Nonsense, Bessie, I don’t believe it. I looked upon her as an infant.’

‘Because she doesn’t talk perpetually about her old age. It seems such a little while ago that you were a mere girl at Rome!’

Norma turned pale. ‘Don’t, Bessie, don’t!’ she said in a low voice. Her sister glanced at her curiously.

‘What a strange creature you are! Do you still reproach yourself so much? It was only that you were inexperienced, and, my dear, a little giddy!’

‘No, it was more,’ said Norma. ‘More than once I had the fear, but I held it at arm’s length, I would not allow it to interfere with my pleasure. I shut my eyes.’

‘Well, if you did,’ Bessie replied, filing bills as she spoke, ‘if you did, I’m sure you

were sorry enough. It nearly killed you. And you have saddled yourself all these years with Paul's sister, which I should consider a very sufficient penance. However, I hope she will not any longer interfere with your life.—Come in. Mrs. Magraith to see me? Tell Mrs. Magraith to wait.—As I was saying, I hope that's at an end. She has taken herself off, and you surely won't have her again. Why doesn't she marry? When I heard she was with the Lawrences, I fancied she had an eye to Mr. Lawrence; and certainly that would have been curious, Norma, considering how much he was mixed up with Paul and all of us at that time. I suppose *he* really is getting on?'

'He is thirty-seven,' Norma said quickly.

'Is that all? Oh, that would do very well for Lucy! But now, think about what I have said,' went on Lady Drummond affectionately. 'Don't talk as if you were a

hundred, and when you see anyone you like, don't make him and yourself miserable with ridiculous scruples about marrying again. Once I did think you were going to make a Moloch out of Lucy. I hope that's over, but I never feel sure that you mayn't set up another. And you don't know what a comfort it would be to me to see you really happy.'

When Bessie talked like that, her sister always felt deeply grateful to her. She came quickly now and kissed her, and though she shook her head, Lady Drummond did not choose to see it. She put her hands on Norma's shoulders as she knelt by her side, and exclaimed—

'Robert may say what he likes, but Madge is, she certainly is going to be like you.'

'Oh, I hope so!' cried Norma eagerly. 'I shall be so glad if she is!'

'And you won't mind her nose? Her nose is her weak point'—mournfully.

‘Her nose! What is the matter with it? It always seems to me the dearest little nose!’

‘Now that is really dear of you, Norma! It is Robert’s fault; he makes such a fuss, he is always talking about her nose. And it is very unfair, because, as I invariably tell him, it belongs unmistakably to his family—it is exactly like his own sister’s. However, I feel pretty sure it will improve; I see a distinct difference already.’

To please Bessie, Norma made no more allusions to her age, and submitted to one or two alterations in her dress, though, as Lady Drummond acknowledged, she had a style of her own which suited her. She felt, indeed, the influence of the cheery household in which she found herself, and which seemed broader and fresher than her own, moving, as she acknowledged, on easier lines, whereas hers had an inclination to fall into grooves. She thought

it good, too, for Agnes, whose nature might easily be cramped, and Bessie's naughtier children had something breezy and invigorating in their natures which Norma recognised as healthy, and looked at with a little envy.

'It's their father, my dear,' said Lady Drummond in explanation. 'A man in the house keeps things going, and saves one from becoming morbid.'

And though the idea of a morbid Bessie made her sister laugh, she could not but own that there was truth in the remark.

Then came Miss Ellison's letter, which, if it did not shake her determination, moved her to the depths. How persistent he was, how faithful! What foolish dream possessed Lucy to suppose that such a nature would change and turn to her! And whether it were from Bessie's sturdy common sense, or the air of vigour and hopefulness about the house, certain it is that for the first time Norma per-

mitted hope to enter her own heart. It was very sure that Lucy could not marry him by force, and when she was convinced that he had no thoughts of her, she would not wait for ever, she would probably marry someone else, and even her sister-in-law's scrupulousness could not suppose that she would then remain bound by her engagement. But until this happened, or until Lucy gave other release, she could do nothing.

Meanwhile Lucy in London was tossed and racked by such conflicting emotions as she had never felt before.

She longed for Lawrence's coming, yet dreaded it. For two or three days she would not leave the house lest she should miss him. Then, as he did not appear, she made up her mind that Miss Ellison—whom she feared—had told him, perhaps all; for it was not impossible to her to conceive that Norma should have repeated to her friend everything, even

her own unworthy part. And though she had a hundred excellent reasons to present to herself for all that she had done—for she was a person who always required to stand well with herself—she could not, naturally, endure that Lawrence should learn who had been standing in his way, and why.

Long, then, as she might to see him, this panic heightened as a week passed and yet he did not come, and, instead of staying at home, she was out from morning till night, hoping that no ill chance might bring them together. In this interval he did come—twice. Having heard of the ill success of Miss Ellison's letter, he determined upon once more appealing to Lucy, and he felt that he should now speak with greater strength. He, therefore, finding that she was not at home, wrote and asked her when she could see him, and obliged her—half unwillingly, half eagerly—to fix a time.

She chose late in the afternoon, and there

was a very subdued light when he arrived, she sitting with her back to the window, with the hope of hiding her nervousness. He, as usual, opened the subject at once.

‘I went to Dover, and I saw Miss Ellison,’ he said.

‘About Norma’s decision? And could she throw any light? Though I needn’t ask, for Miss Ellison has never been known to allow that she was baffled. But, I beg your pardon. Perhaps she *knew*.’ Her voice was unsteady.

‘No,’ said Lawrence gravely; ‘she did not know.’

It was hard for Lucy to keep back a cry of exultation. Here was one danger—the worst—averted.

‘Is it possible!’ she said smiling. He did not smile.

‘She,’ he went on, ‘believes that you not only know, but that you could remove the difficulty.’

‘I!’

‘It is difficult for me to credit, because I can’t conceive it possible that you would not help us if you could. Still, there might be some misunderstanding, something which may strike you as serious, while if we talked it over, it might be quickly set straight. I have come here to-day to implore you to think of this. I think by this time you know what all this is to me.’

Lucy’s voice was hard—

‘Because I know—and Miss Ellison doesn’t—what prevents Norma from marrying you, you—and Miss Ellison—have no right to go further. I don’t see why I am set upon. Norma has told you that it cannot be, and— isn’t that generally enough?’

‘Pray don’t treat it in that way,’ he said eagerly; ‘I don’t claim any right, I only ask you as a friend. What I have sometimes fancied is whether you thought our marriage

might cost you a home? It would only, I hope, give you a brother.'

'You are arranging matters well in advance, Mr. Lawrence,' said Lucy bitterly. 'Do not fear. When you and Norma marry, I shall not inflict myself upon you.'

'But why do you speak as if it were an infliction?' he remonstrated, and indeed he was genuinely distressed. 'I know very well what you and Norma have been to each other, and it would be my most earnest wish that there should be no difference.'

'Are you going to marry?' she asked tauntingly, but the next moment her face altered and her voice softened. 'Oh,' she cried, 'how changed you are, how different! We used to be such good friends, and now we never meet but you hurt me! You can speak of no one but Norma—we are all lost in her!'

Something in this appeal, perhaps some hidden chord of passion, moved George Law-

rence strangely. It was an accusation, and one which seemed to come from her heart. Yet what had he done to deserve it? It appeared as if she were blaming him for the very matter which he could have sworn had drawn them together. Hurt her! How should this hurt her?

‘You must forgive me,’ he said slowly and hesitatingly. Forgive him—for what? Lucy, looking at him, recognised his unconsciousness, and received her sharpest pang. ‘You must forgive me,’ he repeated; ‘I suppose I am horribly selfish. This separation is like a nightmare, it overpowers one’s ordinary self. And then it is to so few that I can speak. I have always felt that when I was near you I was somehow near her.’

She could bear it no longer; she sprang to her feet.

‘Don’t let us talk more—you can’t understand, you never will understand!’

‘What is the mystery?’ he said impatiently. ‘And why can’t I understand? Am I always to be kept in this unenlightened state? Am I never to know?’

‘Never,’ she said defiantly; ‘never!’

‘We shall see,’ he replied significantly. ‘There is someone who will help me.’

‘Who?’

‘You,’ he said, looking at her and smiling. ‘You will forget all that has bothered you; you will go back to the times when, as you say, we were very good friends, and your kind heart will make you set to work to put this tangle straight.’

Then for the first time she faltered.

‘Oh,’ she cried a little wildly, ‘I warn you not to think that of me!’

‘Warn, if you please,’ he said confidently, ‘but I am right; you will do it, and you will be glad to have done it, because it is a very happy thing to create happiness.’

He was gone before she had time to utter her denial again, and she was left standing in the middle of the room, looking after him, with her heart in a whirl of emotion. How she loved him as he said those words! They went straight to the best part of her, that part which was not dead, though pressed down, as it seemed, by something stronger. Upon this his faith in her acted like a clarion call. It answered, it leapt up. It had strength—for the moment—to tear away the veil with which she had very carefully covered up her plans and subterfuges. There—for the moment—they lay, bare and repulsive, unutterably mean and hateful. She shuddered at the sight. She had taken such prodigious care to keep them dressed up so as to present a fair exterior, she had such excellent excuses for every use she had made of them, that it absolutely terrified her when for the first time she saw them in their naked hideousness.

Yet through it all she was sensible of a thrill of delight. He had trusted her. He had judged her nobly. And when she remembered how dangerously near she had advanced in this last interview to a loss of self-control, to a betrayal of herself to him, she felt as a person might feel who suddenly awoke to a consciousness of having by a miracle escaped shipwreck.

But it was not to be expected that this exaltation would last. Before she slept that night she had almost resolved to write the letter which should give him to Norma, but when she awoke in the morning the other feelings were uppermost. She could not. It was too hard. She began to temporise again. She would wait. If he were faithful, Norma might grow weary of it all. She no longer, it was true, ventured to say to herself that the marriage should never be ; she had been sufficiently frightened not to venture upon so

much ; but delay—delay might be almost praiseworthy, was certainly pardonable. She would wait—wait, at any rate, until she had seen Norma. When she came back—and the time was drawing very near—when she came back she would go to Dover and judge for herself.

Only, meanwhile, those words of his touched—stung her: she could not shake off the burden of his faith.

Also, as has been already hinted, she liked to feel that in her hands rested the decision ; that, in a way, she was the controller of his fate. This, indeed, had a very potent charm for her, or would have had, if here again her conscience had not been roused to antagonism, and said so much against it, that the satisfaction was lessened. It was one thing to have the power, another to reflect how the power had been gained.

But through all these, and above all these,

there was something else at work. For the first time in her life, Lucy had been stirred by real love, and the deeper and the truer love is, the more unselfish it becomes, and the nearer it approaches the divine. She loved George Lawrence, and that love was working within her, leavening the heart. She was tortured by its pain, but she could not remain inert under its sweet influence ; it was moving her, lifting her above herself.

So she wavered—tossed here and there, angry, miserable, resentful, remorseful. After a few days had passed, she began to think that the next moment would bring Lawrence, hardly knowing whether she longed for or dreaded his coming, undecided whether to remain obstinate or to tell him that by her action she would make him happy. But he did not come. He was waiting, a prey to many doubts, and yet something within assured him that he was acting prudently in

leaving his last words to work. It must be owned, however, that his self-restraint cost him something, and that he often thought of an argument which might have been powerfully advanced ; and as the days went on and he heard nothing, his hope began to fail.

Still he held to his resolution, and Lucy grew more sick of heart. She had friends in London, but she was a unit of less consequence in London than in Dover, and her winter had not been particularly brilliant, or her companions amusing. Failure was written across her plans, the future looked dull and spiritless, and she could not regard herself with the calm admiration which in general was provided by her moral standpoint. One day she took up a heap of photographs, turning them idly over without much thought of the originals, when she suddenly came upon one of Major Macarthy. With a rush the whole remembrance of that time swept over

her, and for the first time she thought of the man himself, not of the persons surrounding him, of herself, indeed, as a prominent person. She remembered the faces of the people, who, grave and silent, trooped up to the rectory that autumn afternoon, to see the dead man they loved so well, lying with his face to the setting sun. What had it been, this influence? He was not clever—about many things he might be charged with foolishness—he was not rich, and yet they all loved him; through the winter months his grave—Lawrence told her—was never left without some offerings. He had never failed one of them in their need, had never seen suffering without trying to relieve it, had never spared himself. Her own conscience shrank trembling from such a test. Because she was suffering, she schemed that others should suffer too. Norma she did not much think about, but Lawrence—she could not help seeing something of what it

was to him, this sickening, hopeless waiting! The tumult of thought which had first stirred uneasily, and then, under George Lawrence's words, leapt into a storm, now gathered an almost menacing power round the recollection of the man whom, living, she had despised. She cried bitterly, for even at this supreme moment of trial the instinct of self-pity was strong within her, but after she had sobbed a good deal, she went to her writing-table, and scrawled a few cold and hasty lines to Norma, closing them hurriedly, and although it was too late for the post, she gave them to her maid to post at once.

Then she would tell Lawrence. She wanted her reward. He should not hear of it from Norma, he should know that it was to her he owed everything. Her poor little heart, so cramped and dwarfed by the burden of self, could not shake off the incubus, although it had been capable of a great effort. She must

be dramatic even if she were in despair. Lawrence would certainly come. But when one day passed, and a second, without bringing him, she could bear it no longer, and the next afternoon wrote a note begging him to come and see her.

Meanwhile he was feeling that his effort with her was all in vain. From Saturday to Tuesday he went down to Richmond. On Tuesday when he reached his lodgings he found a letter from Miss Ellison, telling him that she had just heard from Norma, that there was a panic of measles at Craigmuir, that she meant to leave on Monday, travel through, and reach Dover on Tuesday. 'There is no use in trying to see her,' wrote Miss Ellison, 'unless you have something definite to say. Let me, at any rate, have a talk with her first, and if you are impatient to be doing something, you might take the opportunity of running down to see Bessie Drummond.'

Lawrence was off that evening. He caught the evening train to Edinburgh, rolled himself in his rug, for the air was bitterly cold, and shut out thought by the help of a cigar and an evening paper.





CHAPTER XXXI.

When the mesmerizer Snow
With his hand's first sweep
Put the earth to sleep,
'Twas a time when the heart could show
All.

ROBERT BROWNING.



THE scare about measles passed as quickly as it came, turned out to be no more than an inoffensive rash, and gave no cause for breaking up the pleasant party. Norma, however, was only quickening her own departure by a day or two, and though Bessie begged her to stay them out, she would only linger for one day.

‘They expect me at home,’ she said, ‘and I am sure I had better go.’

‘I believe it is that ridiculous Jack who is driving you,’ asserted Lady Drummond discontentedly.

‘He *is* rather ridiculous. I didn’t mind while he made it half a joke, but to have a boy eight years one’s junior sighing and looking daggers at one, is really too much. And he was such a nice boy, too! Never mind, Bessie; he will be quite sensible again, and take his proper interest in the farm and the fishing, when I have been for twenty-four hours out of the house.’

‘Where’s Norma?’ cried Sir Robert, coming in with a heavy step. ‘What’s this about your going to-morrow, Norma? You’d better not, take my word for it. You’ll have an awfully cold time.’

‘Neither Agnes nor I mind the cold,’ she replied lightly. ‘I can tell you that in coming here, what with hot tins and furs, we were almost melted. I have settled

everything, Robert, and I would really rather go.'

'Then in that case you must. But there's a lot of snow about.'

'I've said all I can,' added his wife.

'However, we'll see that you're well packed in,' promised cheerful Sir Robert, 'and I don't suppose much harm can come to you. You're a wise woman to go straight through. What's the good of knocking about at draughty stations? That's what I never can persuade Bessie.'

'Oh, I find my own way a very comfortable one,' said Lady Drummond nodding. 'I hope Norma's may be as successful.'

'I must go and break to Chambers that she has to take out some of our things again,' said Mrs. Winyeatt. 'You have no idea what it will cost her. When once she has folded a dress, she would like it to remain so for ever.'

‘She looks much better for her stay here,’ remarked Bessie, when her sister had left the room.

‘Looked well enough before, didn’t she?’ asked her husband, taking up the ‘Times.’

‘She was so pre-occupied. She seemed to have something on her mind.’

‘Grizzling, eh?’

‘Robert! You know as well as I do that Norma is not the woman to grizzle. But that Dover life of hers wants change and—an occasional upsetting——’

‘A husband, in short!’ put in Sir Robert, expecting a prompt snub.

But to his surprise his wife accepted the suggestion with favour.

‘Yes,’ she agreed with a sigh, ‘I wish she would marry. She might. But I begin to despair. I hope Madge won’t stand out so determinedly against her own good.’

‘Don’t be afraid. She’ll take an inde-

pendent line, with that nose,' returned Sir Robert mischievously.

If Bessie could have read a letter which looked like all other letters, and was innocently handed to Norma out of the post-bag by Sir Robert at breakfast! She opened it almost reluctantly, and then in a moment, room, breakfast-table, young Jack Drummond's face seemed all to go round in a whirl. She had felt so much, pictured so much, in that one instant, that surely hours had gone by, and yet here was Jack Drummond finishing his sentence in a tragic voice—

‘Some tongue, Mrs. Winyeatt? You’ll allow me to cut you some tongue?’

‘And I’ll be hanged if it didn’t sound as if he were asking if she would prefer his cutting his own throat!’ said Sir Robert to his Bessie afterwards, with much disgust. ‘I didn’t think anyone in our family could be such a fool!’

But perhaps it was as well for Norma that this open love-making might have been considered disconcerting, for joy and amazement had left her almost dumb. If—lately—some gleams of hope had stolen into her heart, and, once being there, could not be shut out again, they only pointed to some far future day. If Lucy married—then! But that she—she, of all persons in the world!—should give up, yield her dominant will, write that she had considered the matter of their conversation at Marlham, and that if Norma wished to call Mr. Lawrence to her side, she was at liberty to do so—this, this was beyond her wildest tether of hope. Yet here it was. The words were plain, even if they danced before her eyes, and if she had to murmur no—yes—she did not know what, to Jack Drummond's tragic offer of tongue. When she came down, dressed for her journey, her eyes were so bright, her

whole face so sparkling, that Lady Drummond stared at her.

‘I never knew Craigmuir work such wonders!’ she cried. ‘Norma, you are a different creature!’

‘Yes,’ said Norma softly, ‘I am. Thank you for all your kindness, Bessie.’

‘You ought to come oftener. Promise me that in future you will come oftener.’

‘I will try. I will write to you, to-morrow.’

‘Oh, not to-morrow. I am not *quite* so unreasonable. You forget how tired you will be.’

‘No, I don’t forget. I shall write to-morrow. I must.’

‘Bessie—Norma!’ cried Sir Robert, striding briskly in, ‘are you ready—are you coming? Time we were off.’

Quite a party went with Norma in the omnibus. Sir Robert drove his four greys,

but Jack Drummond looked so miserable when he offered him a seat on the box, that his good-natured cousin burst out laughing.

‘Go where you like, my boy,’ he said. ‘Grant will be too glad of an outside place. Will anybody lick those fools of dogs! One can’t hear oneself speak.’

Miss Mainwaring had gone, but there were two Miss Falconers, who made a hero of Jack Drummond, and were not at all sorry to bid Mrs. Winyeatt good-bye. It was very ungrateful of Jack to wish with all his heart that they had stayed at home, and not added to the many claims on Mrs. Winyeatt’s attention. But he found his opportunity for a moment when he had taken her rugs from the porter, and jumped in to unstrap and arrange them.

‘You don’t know what this time has been to me!’ he whispered fervently.

‘It has been a very nice time for us all,’

returned Norma kindly. 'Agnes, have you wished Mr. Drummond good-bye? I hope we shall all meet again some day.'

'Macintosh says there is some report of snow along the line; you'd better have waited, Norma. Got your flask? And you go straight through?'—from Sir Robert.

'No, we stop in London. I have to see Lucy.'

It was Bessie's turn.

'Have you everything you want? Madge is on the verge of tears. Nothing left behind?—keys?—tickets? Good-bye, Chambers; good-bye, Agnes.'

A general chorus of Good-byes, a waving of hands, Jack Drummond running along the platform, and they were off, and then Norma, under press of some rush of feeling, stooped down and kissed Agnes.

'Mamma, I wish you would have Madge to stay with us,' said the little girl.

‘Oh, we will, we will!’—so gladly that Agnes looked at her reproachfully.

‘Are you glad to go?’

‘I am very glad we came,’ said Norma, looking into her eyes and smiling. ‘And I like going home.’

‘I don’t think *I* do—much,’ said Agnes with a sigh. ‘There’s a pony at Craigmuir, and Uncle Robert is very nice, and there are such lots of dogs.’

‘You shall have a dog if you want one. I will ask Uncle Robert to look out for something that he fancies, and to send it to Dover.’

‘Oh!’—Agnes sprang up and gave her a rapturous hug. ‘I wish Uncle Robert would bring it himself!’

And it almost appeared as if Norma were ready to promise this, so anxious was she that some of her own secret store of happiness should radiate upon her child. She talked to her merrily of the good things which it

appeared time was to bring ; of Madge's visit and where they would take her, and all the wonderful places they would see. And it seemed that many of these places were those to which they had gone last summer.

‘But last year we had Mr. Lawrence,’ remarked Agnes, who had always a slight tendency to look at the reverse side.

‘Perhaps he will come again.’

‘I don't think he will, after all this time,’ sighed the little girl.

Thanks to the provision for their comfort, they were quite warm in the carriage, but outside the aspect of things was sufficiently dreary. Everything was sheeted with snow, and the greyness and absence of sun gave a very forlorn look to the broad landscape. Agnes after a time grew sleepy, and Norma was left to her own happy thoughts and wonderings. She read Lucy's brief letter again and again, and tried to fathom the causes

which had led to it ; but in vain, except that, as Miss Ellison said, Norma always believed that the most unlikely people might do something heroic. It was true that another woman would have refused to forgive the wrong done to her, but in this woman's eyes it was already swept away, and she longed for nothing more than to reach Lucy and show her what she felt.

Few people were travelling. Every now and then some official looked in, but otherwise they had the carriage to themselves, and happy dreams carried her so lightly over the way that when they reached Edinburgh she was amazed to find herself so far. Here they got food, and sat by the fire until it was time to start again, and Agnes was charmed with the lights beginning to twinkle from the tall houses in the Old Town. But presently a guard came into the carriage.

‘ I don't know, ma'am,’ he said, ‘ if you're

aware that it's not unlikely we may have some deefficulty in getting along to-night. I'm not saying that we shall,' he added with caution, 'but the snow's been falling heavily about the Border, and I was thinking, that with the young lady and no gentleman, if it was the same to you, you might prefer remaining in Edinburgh the night?'

Mrs. Winyeatt hastily reflected.

'There is no actual danger, I suppose?'

'No danger, ma'am; but, as I was saying, there might be inconvenience.'

'I think we will risk it,' she said quietly; 'thank you for telling me.'

In truth, now that her pent-up feelings had been allowed to follow their vent, she could hardly have been stopped by any difficulty. They had plenty of warm wraps, and an ample provision of food; besides, it was March, and to be snowed up in the month of March seemed an absurd anomaly. She was

not soon alarmed, and after all the guard, a cautious Scotchman, probably thought that a very little discomfort might daunt a lady. If the snow became really too deep, they might get out at some other station and find beds in a town or village, at any rate nearer than Edinburgh. It was certainly snowing more thickly as they went along, and through the dusk they watched the flakes driving black against a sombre sky. On one side of the train little heaps of snow rose along the window-ledges, and when the door was opened it let in thickly-powdered figures to inspect tickets or change the hot-water tins. Shadows deepened outside. Agnes was comfortably packed up to sleep, the blinds were drawn across, and they could fairly keep out the cold, which yet, it must be owned, was more penetrating than Norma had expected. By-and-by she too slept a little, a delicious sleep, which seemed always just touched with

happy consciousness, and from which she awoke smiling. It struck her, however, with a sense of uneasiness, that the train laboured heavily and that they were going but slowly. Agnes slept warmly. Chambers also slept. A little fine snow had crept in at one of the ventilators, and was lying there unmelted. Norma got softly up and closed the aperture. At the next station she called the guard, who reported that the line was very heavy, but they hoped to get on ; they had the finest engine on the line, and the driver thought the worst was nearly over. One passenger, however, a little red-faced man in a grey coat, elected to get out at this station, and Norma hesitated. On inquiry she found that the inns were at some distance from the station, that there were no cabs on the spot, and owing to the snow, there would be great difficulty in getting one. It seemed folly to take the child into the teeth of the night in order to avoid an uncer-

tain danger. Once more, she closed every outlet, made her companions swallow some food, and presently forgot all about her surroundings in a dream that was half-sleeping, half-waking.

It must at last have ended in sleep, for she was roused by a heavy dragging yet soft sensation, by the train stopping, and by shouts. Agnes still slept, Chambers jumped up with a start. The window was so thickly frost-coated that it was impossible to do more than scratch a blurred hole, and at last Norma let it down and stretched out. Men were already moving about with lanterns, but with difficulty, and plunging at every footstep deep in snow. It was unnecessary to put any questions as to what had happened. Pallor of snow all round, heaped high on either side, the thud of the engine as it seemed to struggle against the vast inert overpowering mass, spoke for themselves. It was quite plain that they had

run into and were embedded in a snow-drift, formed, as Norma thought, in a cutting.

She was not the woman to make unnecessary demands upon the men, who were better employed than in answering them, though other passengers were shouting questions, and little curls of hot breath came out into the frosty air from train-windows. Mrs. Winyeatt closed hers, and explained the situation to Chambers. There seemed no reason to fear danger, but, as the guard had said, there might be considerable inconvenience and discomfort, and Norma blessed Bessie's forethought in providing them with what she had described as enough provisions for a week's siege. Meanwhile it was probable that all that could be done in the way of digging would be done, and that no one who was not a man with a spade could do better than practise the grace of patience.

The cold was beyond doubt growing very severe.

They had come so slowly that they had lost much time, and although they had not long crossed the Border, it was already the middle of the night. The cutting, it is true, sheltered them a good deal from the force of an eager wind, but this swept in a draught between the banks, carrying with it minute particles of snow-dust as sharp as glass. Snow was not actually falling or only falling sparsely ; what the wind brought was the light coating that had lately fallen, not as yet bound close by the frost.

Minutes dragged by with interminable tediousness, and lengthened into an hour. Almost all the male passengers had turned out, and were helping the small body of railway men in their efforts to clear the line. But it became evident that the drift extended to so great a length that a far larger number of workmen would be necessary before any impression could be made on the mass, and the question

of what was best for the passengers became one of some importance.

Agnes had awakened sleepy, and complaining of cold, and her mother, fancying from the sound of voices that work had been given up, let down the window, and put her first inquiry. Her friend the guard stumbled over to answer it.

It appeared that there was much discussion as to what was best for the passengers. There were only about a dozen women and children in the train, and twice as many men. There was a station a mile and a half further on, and the general opinion was in favour of all going there. There they would find fire and more substantial shelter than the train could afford. The drift was so deep and the engine and front carriages so embedded that it would not only be long before the line was cleared, but some hours before the train could be extricated. At the same time it was possible

that, on hearing of the disaster, an engine would be sent in pursuit, which might take the train back to Berwick or Edinburgh. Would the lady wait for that?

The lady thought she would prefer to walk. It seemed to her, indeed, that any movement would be better than sitting shivering between banks of snow. There was no knowing how long the engine would be in coming, and—to go back!

The guard looked at her with respect when he found she at once made up her mind. So many of the passengers had hesitated and questioned, and expected answers beyond the knowledge of man, that, though long-suffering by nature, he had been goaded into rebellion. He hastened to assure her that she was right, and if there was any difficulty with the little girl, some of them would be quite willing to carry her. Norma's resolution, indeed, gave an impetus to the

others ; and in a few minutes the men with their spades were clearing a little pathway up the embankment, and a curious company was climbing up by the aid of the lanterns.

There was a good deal of laughing as well as of grumbling. Agnes was delighted, Mrs. Winyeatt and Chambers between them carried their basket of provisions, which was likely to be of great use to more than themselves. One poor woman was so pale and so poorly clad, that Norma, without a word, took off her own fur cloak and wrapped it round her. And then they set off for their difficult and floundering walk.

How strange it was ! The night had fairly cleared, the heavy snow-clouds, broken up by the wind, drifted wildly across a starlit sky, which gave sufficient light to show the ghastly and desolate stretch of snow, reaching like some monstrous shroud into the far distance. Along this vast sweep straggled

the little black procession, two lanterns flinging out their feeble cheer. The friendly guard had stayed behind with his train, but he had told one of the others to look after Mrs. Winyeatt, and the man after a time offered to carry Agnes part of the way. But Agnes had something — on an emergency — of her mother's spirit, and when Norma had given up her basket to the man, she was able to help the little girl better, and the exercise had unstiffened her own limbs, and sent the blood coursing more briskly. It was, doubtless, a very fatiguing walk, but Norma had no feeling that she, at any rate, required pity ; the spring of happiness within her making her so indifferent to discomfort that she was able to cheer the other women, and to keep up their spirits when they were inclined to flag.

The station was reached at last, and, news having been taken there of the accident, what preparations were possible had been made.

Being only, however, a small station, with a limited staff, and the one man who could be spared having hurried out to get help, these preparations consisted of no more than a good fire in the waiting-room, into which they all crowded. It appeared that there was a village at hand, from which provisions could be got in the morning, and meanwhile Mrs. Winyeatt proceeded to unpack her basket, and to deal out rations as bountifully as she dared. This unexpected good fortune raised their spirits wonderfully, and on the strength of it Norma became a sort of heroine among them. The woman who still wore the fur cloak was perhaps the least grateful of all, but it was evident that she would have suffered bitterly without it; and Mrs. Winyeatt was glad enough to see it round her.

The difficulty was to find enough chairs or boxes. The men stretched themselves grumbling on the floor, one of the few chairs

was given to Mrs. Winyeatt, and for Agnes' sake she did not refuse it. She lifted the tired little girl on her lap, took off her boots to dry them by the fire, looked at the motley company with some little amusement, and by-and-by, her own head leaning against the hard wall, slept as soundly as ever she had done in her life.

Not for long.

She was suddenly awakened by what seemed an extraordinary noise, and started up wondering where she was, and what had happened. There was hissing, a bell ringing, a rush, then came confused voices and tramping ; she did not at first realise that she was at a station, and that this meant no more than the arrival of a train. Several of the sleepers, however, raised themselves with grunts, shook themselves, and hurried out on the platform to see what the arrival meant for them. One man came and poked the fire.

‘We’ll maybe get a chance of going on,’ he said to Mrs. Winyeatt. ‘They’ll have to send us back in this train if it can’t get further ; unless any passenger prefers to stop behind in this hole. That won’t be me, for one. Didn’t know boards was so hard till I tried ’em for a bed.’

As he said the last word the door was flung open, and some dozen of the new arrivals tramped in, stamping, and—chiefly—smoking. When they saw the already crowded condition of the room they stared round them in surprise.

‘Not many beds here to let,’ said the man who had already spoken. ‘Such as there is, you’re welcome, gentlemen.’

Norma had taken off her hat, and tied a lace scarf round her head ; it fell forward a little and shaded her face, so that, from the shadow and the dim light of the waiting-room, in which the gas was turned down, her face was scarcely

visible. But a gentleman who had come in behind the others, and stood inside the doorway, surveying the room, started as his eye fell on her. In two seconds he had pitched away his cigar, was through the astonished group and standing up straight before her.

‘ You, Norma—you ! ’

If her thoughts had been less full of him, if those thoughts had not been so happy, and expectation already looking forward with delight, she would have been more troubled. As it was, it scarcely seemed astonishing that he was there—in the most improbable place in the world. Agnes was much more surprised.

‘ Why, mamma ! ’ she cried helplessly, turning towards her mother a flushed face and large startled eyes.

‘ I don’t know that I can say anything more than Agnes,’ said Lawrence with a half laugh. ‘ I thought you were at home again.’

He was infinitely more moved than she ; to him it was not nearly such a simple matter. He had not known when or how he should ever meet her again, while she had been able in her own mind to bring that time very near. And for him the barrier still existed ; he was expecting each moment to have it thrust before his eyes. Yet she was looking at him with sweet eyes in which there was no warning.

‘ We put off our coming for a day, and our train is buried in a snow-drift a mile and a half away,’ she explained. ‘ Isn’t it more wonderful that you should be here ? ’

‘ Oh, I ? I was on my way——’ he began, and then stopped awkwardly. The sudden meeting had taken away his self-possession. How should he say where he had been going ? But she saved him the attempt.

‘ To Craigmuir ? ’—as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

‘Well, yes, to Craigmuir,’ he repeated doggedly.

‘And how shall you get on?’

‘I meant—all who are here are men who for one reason or other wanted to push on—we meant to come as far as we could, and if the drift couldn’t be removed, walk round it. The train you came in will have to be taken back.’

‘But,’ said Norma, with a small smile curving her lips, ‘Bessie doesn’t expect you at Craigmuir. Must you go on?’

‘And leave you here? No,’ he said briefly.

But something in her voice, in her smile, some touch of playfulness which he had not seen in her of late, was stirring his heart as bare branches are stirred by breath of spring. He bent forward and tried to look into her eyes, and then became impatiently aware that other eyes were watching them curiously.

‘Can’t you come out of this hole?’ he said a little imperiously. ‘You won’t hurt.’

She paused, then—‘Yes, I will come. Agnes can stay with Chambers.’

He wrapped a shawl round her. His hands shook, for she did not resist.

‘Haven’t you a fur cloak or something?’

‘This will do very well,’ she said, and went lightly through the crowd.

Outside it was clear. The wind had died away, clouds had vanished, and frosty stars shone brightly.

‘Here is a deliverance from that stuffy room!’ she said turning to him as they walked down the little platform beyond the point where the train was still waiting. She met his eyes fastened upon her.

‘Norma—is it ended?’ he asked hoarsely, and as she did not immediately answer, he stopped her. ‘For God’s sake!’

It was under his breath, yet it was a cry,

a cry which pierced her heart. For reply she put her hand into his.

‘I should have written to you to-morrow,’ she said softly.





CHAPTER XXXII.

The bird on the bough.
The song of the bird,
The blue river reaches
By soft breeze stirred ;
O soul, and hast thou found again thy treasure ?
O world, and art thou once more filled with pleasure ?
O world, hast thou passed
Thy sad winter again ?
O soul, hast thou cast
Thy dull vesture of pain ?
O winter, sad wert thou and full of sorrow,
O soul, O world, the summer comes to-morrow !
O soul, 'tis love quickens
Time's languorous feet :
O world, 'tis spring wakens
Thy fair blossoms sweet ;
Fair world, fair soul, that lie so close together,
Each with sad wintry days and fair spring weather.—GWEN.



PILOGUES are dull things, and so
playgoers have found out, and will
have none of them. But story-
readers still hold to the old traditions, or

perhaps it is the story-writers who are unwilling so curtly to part with the friends who have gone along with them in kindly companionship.

The journey, at any rate, needs no talking about. Some time afterwards, when Chambers, who behaved very well at the time, made an allusion to 'that dreadful night,' Mrs. Winyeatt stared at her. And, indeed, no one was the worse for it, and the woman from whom Norma never reclaimed her cloak, was certainly the better. They reached London safely, and then came the first shadow on Lawrence's bliss; for Norma went to a hotel, and told him he must see her no more that day; she should stay till night with Lucy. Nor would she listen to his appeals to be allowed to come too.

Lucy, to whom she had telegraphed, met her quite easily. 'You poor thing,' she exclaimed, kissing her, 'what you must have

gone through! The papers mentioned the snow this morning, and then came your telegram. Haven't you really got any cold?—nor Agnes either? I rather hoped they would not have let you start in such weather.'

'Oh, we were not to be pitied—we did very well,' returned Norma colouring. Lucy was easy, it was she who felt guilty and shame-faced. She could not blurt out what had happened on the journey, yet until it was told and until she had alluded to Lucy's letter her position felt intolerable. And Lucy did not seem inclined to allude to it.

'You are really going home to-morrow? You won't stay in London over Holy Week and Easter? I rather fancied you might; I thought you would like the services.'

'No, I am really going home. Lucy'—Norma went to the sofa and sat by her side. The girl's face hardened slightly, but she made no other sign. 'Lucy, I must tell you, you

have made me very happy. It was good of you to write.'

'Do you look at it in that light?'

'How can I look at it in any other? Perhaps you ought not to have had the power of separating us in your hands, but—you had it.'

'Ah, then, you repented?' There was more than a touch of taunt in the girl's tone.

'You wished you had not promised?'

'No, I think not,' returned Norma slowly.

'What do you mean, then?'

'Don't let us talk of it, we need not—now. You have written, and there is an end.'

Lucy was silent a moment, then she said, 'Oh, we haven't come to the end yet. I suppose you know that Mr. Lawrence is in London? Are you or I to write and tell him that he is at liberty to pay his addresses?—that's the correct phrase, isn't it?'—with a hard little laugh.

Norma coloured again.

‘That is not required,’ she said with some difficulty. Lucy turned sharply upon her.

‘Then you have been dishonest, after all!’ she cried in almost a tone of triumph. Norma’s eyes flashed.

‘Lucy!’ she exclaimed. The girl recovered herself in a measure.

‘Well, you must have been in communication, then,’ she said sullenly.

‘Yes, we have. During the last twenty-four hours.’ She went on to relate what had happened.

Lucy listened eagerly, though with an evident attempt at indifference, and when her sister-in-law had finished, remarked—

‘Very romantic! Almost enough so to please you, Norma. So seldom, isn’t it, that coincidences occur at just the right moment. But this couldn’t have been better if it had been arranged.’

She knew all the time that her words were bitter, unjust; she hated herself for using them, and yet would have had them fifty times as stinging. But Mrs. Winyeatt said quite simply—

‘It was very wonderful. It seems so more to me now as I look back than it did at the time. You see, your letter had so filled my thoughts that when I saw him before me I was scarcely surprised; but for him it was very different.’ She stopped—for a moment she looked appealingly at the girl, but she was only sitting as before, staring at a fan stuck for no apparent reason against the wall, her eyebrows slightly lifted. Yet something, some sense of isolation, of desolation, struck the elder woman painfully. ‘Lucy,’ she cried, ‘let us be friends—please let us be friends! It is what I most wish.’

‘Oh, you can do without Paul’s relations now; you will have to adopt new ones. Mrs.

Lawrence—well, it wouldn't surprise me if you were to find Mrs. Lawrence a little difficult. I should have got on better with her, at any rate. But there is Nelly. I wish you joy of Nelly.'

Mrs. Winyeatt was silent. Then she said, 'I want you to feel that I know that I owe you all—this.'

'What? Nelly?'

'You know what I mean,' said the other gently.

Lucy turned sharply upon her.

'It might have ended differently if he had not seen you when you came down. Everything was against me. But don't think that I regret it now. I'm very thankful. He is dull.'

'Not to me,' said Mrs. Winyeatt smiling.

'Well, then, owing to you.'

'Ah, that is pardonable,' said Norma, smiling still. Lucy in this mood was more like the old Lucy. Still she had something to say

which she would not have said, if without it she could have satisfied Lawrence ; but he had been so persistent, that to avoid creating suspicion, she had promised. ‘When are you coming back to Dover?’ she said, as easily as she could. She knew nothing of Lawrence’s last interview, or the question would have presented more difficulties.

‘Never!’ cried the girl sharply. But the next moment she added with a laugh—‘Did Mr. Lawrence desire you to ask me? He did, I know. I can tell you exactly what you were to say—this was to make *no* difference, my home always to be with you, the curtain to drop upon charming tableau, three standing hand in hand, soft music, tears of joy, bless you, my children! Good Heavens, what fools men are!’

She poured out the words tumultuously, passionately, and when she had ended started up, as if stung beyond endurance. Norma

also rose. Her heart smote her. She felt that this pain lay at her door, yet that nothing she could utter could soothe it. In a minute Lucy came back from the window.

‘I told you that he was dull,’ she said. ‘Never mind, you have said your, or his, say, and you can give any reason you like for my not accepting his kind offer. Mind you say *kind*. I shall not stay in London. I hate it. Probably I shall go abroad. Some people want me to join them.’

Norma kissed her without speaking. When she had gone the girl flung her arms above her head. ‘How could I give him up to her!’ she cried vehemently.

George Lawrence went to Dover with Mrs. Winyeatt the next day—he pretended that immense compensation was owing to him—and Miss Ellison, who knew nothing, fell into a condition of blank amazement at the station, where she had come to meet her friend. She

owned very frankly to being in some degree disappointed, because she had pictured herself as of great use in the affair, and had a hundred unanswerable arguments with which to assail Norma. Her alliance with Lawrence had indeed weighed very faithfully on her mind, and, lo, here was the victory won without her being called upon to strike so much as a stroke! Nor could she even get a satisfactory reason, though she descended so far as to ask Lawrence in private.

‘I know absolutely nothing,’ he said, ‘no more than you. Norma has told me she cannot enter into explanations, and I am only too thankful to take the goods the gods have given me and ask no questions.’

‘Well, all I can say is, that it is very unsatisfactory for those who get no goods,’ returned Miss Ellison.

This was undoubtedly true, but it is to be feared that Lawrence was too happy to give

her the sympathy she deserved. His trust in Norma was absolute, and when he saw that it troubled her to be asked what course of events had brought them together, his lips were sealed. Perhaps in his own mind he connected that last visit of his to Lucy with the matter, but if this were so, he never spoke of it, and on her part she was absolutely true to Paul's sister. It was as Miss Ellison had foreseen; under Lawrence's touch Norma's responsive nature expanded, shook off certain morbid limitations which had threatened to stunt it, grew to weigh the past more justly, to accept the joy of the present as God's good gift, not to be received fearfully. As for Janet Somerville, her amazement and delight knew no bounds, and Mr. Lawrence became in her sight almost as great a hero as Mr. Rose.

‘Really, Janet, one would suppose you were going to be married yourself,’ said Isabel crossly.

‘It’s almost as good.’

‘Well, it’s lucky I did not wait for my dress in order to be Lucy’s bridesmaid,’ returned her sister with a laugh. ‘Lucy really did make herself rather ridiculous.’

‘Poor Lucy!’ sighed Janet.

‘Poor Lucy! Oh, if she only heard you! I wonder how she treats this? She was always equal to an emergency, I’ll say that for her.’

‘Oh, she must very soon have found out all about it,’ Janet replied with a return to cheerfulness; ‘and perhaps she never meant so much as we fancied.’

‘We fancied as much as she meant,’ said Isabel oracularly; and when Janet stared at her, she only laughed, and then sighed, looking at her gloves. ‘Did you ever see such a disreputable sight? And I can’t, I absolutely can’t afford another pair.’

‘Take mine,’ cried Janet, running to her

drawers, and dragging out her scanty store.

‘There, those are really rather nice.’

‘It seems a shame,’ said Isabel, looking longingly at them. Then as they were pressed into her hand, she kissed her sister. ‘I wish, oh, I do wish, Janet, that you were going to marry a rich man; you would do him credit.’

‘I’m the richest girl in the world,’ returned Janet valiantly. ‘I’ve got three pounds thirteen and sixpence saved, screwed out of my allowance, towards my trousseau, and you know Aunt Ellen has promised us a silver teapot.’

‘Well, I can’t conceive how you’ve screwed anything. I know I couldn’t. But then, I always seem to want more than you.’

‘Yes, of course. Still, I’m very proud. It will be so splendid if I’m not obliged to come on poor papa for much.’

‘Oh, poor papa!’ repeated her sister, with a shrug. ‘It’s a comfort, any way, that

Mrs. Winyeatt is going to give us the dresses for her own wedding, because they're sure to be nice. And I hope they're going to be quick about it. Didn't you say Midsummer ?'

'Yes, and Mrs. Winyeatt is going down to Marlham in May. Awful !' said Janet with a sympathetic shudder.

'Is-a-bel !'

'Isabel ! There's papa calling ! Fly !'

It was quite true that Norma had consented to go to the rectory for a week ; true, also, that the visit looked to her little less appalling than Janet had imagined it. But it was a great wish of George Lawrence's, and her feelings towards him at this time were those of one who had much to make up. She went, therefore, for a week at the end of May, and by Lawrence's further wish, she took Agnes with her, as well as Polly Medland on a visit.

It *was* formidable—it could not be otherwise. Mrs. Lawrence's prejudices were plants of hardy growth; even if they seemed to disappear for a time, they were up again before you had time to look round. But she was also a good woman, and Major Macarthy's death had left a softening touch of which she was never after quite unconscious. To the day of her death, and in spite of some disapproval, she would believe that her son would have done better to have let her choose for him and to have married Lucy. But that did not prevent her doing her best to be kind to Norma, and in after years she remarked to Nelly that she was glad George's influence had succeeded in making his wife more considerate towards Lucy.

From the rector and from Nelly, Norma had an enthusiastic welcome; Nelly, indeed, had not looked so happy since the Major's death. Toby, as faithful, as honest, and as

humble as ever, had attached himself chiefly to the rector, but there was not a man, woman, or child in the village but spoke of him as the major's dog; and if any ignorant dog or cat ventured to interfere with him, they got no mercy from their masters.

And the major's grave was thick with primroses and white violets.

.

Orchards lie all along the slopes of the Marlham hills, and to one of them George Lawrence brought Norma the morning before she went back to Dover. To reach it they turned into a narrow lane, and then clambered through a gap in the hawthorn hedge, and up a steep bank to the top. There are days in May in which the most exquisite moment of all the year seems to have been touched. The enchantment and delicacy of the green, the indescribable freshness and youth of the world, the hope which is everywhere

abroad, the gay life which smiles and sings at you—this is the charm which, long waited for, comes at last for those who can see. It was there that day. Grass grew long under the trees, and was sprinkled with constellations of pale primroses, and the airier heads of dandelion clocks. The apple-trees, bearded with moss, gnarled and fantastic in shape, had leaped into life as young as the rest of the world, and rosy blossoms ran along the branches, and swept the grass, and tossed themselves for joy of life against the luminous grey of the sky. On one side the ground fell brokenly away towards the river, on the other a grassy hedge crept along, a hedge in which primroses and blue speedwells nestled, and in the rich red bank were birds' nests, and happy songs and twitterings of joyful counsel. Far in front, between the labyrinth of boughs, and lying in a very sea of white and pink blossom, rose the church tower and

the red roofs of the village, with trees of tenderest lightest green, and a little on the left one tall group of Scotch firs to give the needful touch of sombre contrast.

In such an orchard, and on such a May morning, George Lawrence and Norma wandered enchanted. Everything had a delight, a charm. Love with his touch had made them as young as the youth about them; they sat down and blew dandelion clocks; he showed her the little wren's nest in the hedge. As was to be expected, it was she who first said with a smile—

‘George, do you know that we are behaving absurdly like two children?’

‘I am behaving exactly as I feel, and so are you,’ he said lazily. ‘Nothing absurd in that. I’m ready to make a daisy chain, if that’s all.’

‘You can’t.’

‘Can’t I?’

He set to work, and she sat laughing at him. Presently he remarked—‘The fact is, Norma, you’ve a lot of youth to make up.’

‘I thought I’d done with it.’

‘Ah, I foresee I shall have a great deal to teach you. That is why I am beginning at the beginning—with a daisy chain.’

But as she did not answer, he looked up and saw her eyes shining with tears.

‘Norma!’ he cried with swift change of voice. ‘My darling! Have I hurt you?’

‘Hurt me?—you? No,’ she said, stretching out her hands and smiling through her tears. ‘I was wondering how much you would find in me that was wanting besides the lost youth. I have been afraid of so many things—afraid even of being happy.’

‘Of being happy?’

‘Yes, it seemed as if I—I had no right——’

‘Did you expect to have to earn it?’ he asked tenderly. Then he said with a laugh—

‘I wish I could think that was why you sent me away.’

‘No, it wasn’t——’

‘I know.’ But as he saw she had not finished, he added inquiringly, ‘Well?’

‘I could not have done it for *that*.’

‘No,’ he said, looking at her, ‘you couldn’t. It wouldn’t have been right. It wouldn’t have been you. And you won’t be afraid any more?’

.

All round her there was a shining world, birds, and singing, and blossoms, and the gladness of God’s gifts. How could she be afraid?

THE END.

G.

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